Reformed and Ever-Reforming

Widmer, Corey Jackson

2021

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

REFORMED AND EVER-REFORMING

The Possibility of a Reformed Ecclesiology for Missionary Congregations in Multicultural Contexts

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor of Philosophy aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. V. Subramaniam,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
van de Faculteit Religie en Theologie
op dinsdag 11 mei 2021 om 13.45 uur
in de aula van de universiteit,
De Boelelaan 1105

door

Corey Jackson Widmer

geboren te Florida, U.S.A., Verenigde Staten

promotoren:	prof.dr. S. Paas prof.dr. E.A.J.G. van der Borght

Table of Contents

Introduction 5

Chapter 1: Assessing the Challenge 13
- History 15
- Theology 24
- Culture 40
- Conclusion 47

Chapter 2: A Methodological Framework for Constructing a Practical, Missional Ecclesiology 49
- Don S. Browning and Descriptive Ecclesiology 53
- Roger Haight and Ecclesiology from Below 57
- Nicholas M. Healy and Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology 60
- Apostolicity and Ecclesiology 65
- Apostolicity and Multiculturalism 71

Chapter 3: Engaging the Embodied Beliefs and Lived Theologies Of Diverse Congregations in Mission 75
- Research and Interview Design 77
- New City Fellowship: Chattanooga, TN 80
- Church of All Nations: Minneapolis, MN 90
- Spirit and Truth Fellowship: Philadelphia, PA 102
- Summary and Conclusion 111

Chapter 4: Deepening the Conversation 117
- Lesslie Newbigin and the Church as Foretaste, Sign and Instrument 118
  - Newbigin's Critical Interaction with Reformed Ecclesiology 120
  - Church as Eschatological Sign, Instrument and Foretaste 124
  - The Local Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel 131
  - Summary 133
- Allan Boesak and the Church as Instrument of "World Formative Christianity" 134
  - Nicholas Wolterstorff, Allan Boesak, and the theological mutuality of a cross-cultural friendship 138
  - World Formative Christianity and the Belhar Confession 143
  - Summary 145
- Colin Gunton and the Church as an Echo of the Triune God 147
  - Koinonia, Perichoresis, and the Eschatological Spirit 152
  - Summary 158
- Conclusion 160

Chapter 5: Charting a New Path: Constructing a Reformed Ecclesiology for Missionary Churches in Multicultural Contexts 161
- A Covenantal Ecclesiology 163
- A Transformational Ecclesiology 171
- An Anticipatory Ecclesiology 178
- A Generous Ecclesiology 186
- Conclusion 191

INTRODUCTION

Recently I traveled to a large city in the United States to attend a conference that focused on renewing the missionary impulse of a large American Reformed denomination. After arriving at the airport, I took a subway train from the far southern point of the city where the airport was located, all the way north through the city center in the direction of the large church campus where the conference was being held. As we rode the train, I observed many different people getting on and off. The diversity of cultures and ethnicities represented was at times staggering. Most of the time I was a minority on the train; in several cases my companions and I were the only white travelers in the entire car. I saw multiple nationalities and heard numerous languages. I was struck freshly by the growing diversity of our American cities and the reality that the nations are increasingly represented in our metro areas.

We arrived at the conference and the discussions commenced. Throughout the several days of the conference, I was moved by the passion among the attendees to see our declining denomination renewed. Many leaders from the platform called for a return to our biblical roots and the reclamation of our Reformed heritage, one that is marked by the sovereignty of God and the supremacy of God's Word and gospel. There was also much attention given to missions, evangelism, and church planting. Leader after leader called for the church to reclaim its missional identity and to adopt a missionary posture toward our now post-Christian culture. Overall the experience was energizing and inspiring.

Yet I could not stop thinking about my experience on the train. Looking around the large sanctuary, where nearly 1000 church leaders were gathered, only a small handful of non-white participants were present. I could not help observing the irony of the fact that as we called for a

renewed mission to the people of the surrounding society, the people gathered in this particular room did not reflect the growing majority of that society to which we believed we were sent. I wondered if our commitment to return to the traditional roots of our Reformed denominational heritage would only serve to further isolate ourselves culturally from the increasing diversity around us. I left with gratitude but also with a sense of profound dissonance between the call to an evangelical Reformed renewal and the call to mission to a society in which the cultural pillars of that Reformed tradition are less represented than ever before.

This experience illustrates the dilemma that lies before not just this particular denomination but nearly every congregation and denomination in the United States that values their theological heritage, most of which have been formed in the Western European theological traditions. Within the last one hundred years, seismic changes have occurred in the religious and cultural landscape in North America that have altered the church's relationship to the broader culture. Among the most dramatic of these changes is the influx of cultural diversity in environments that were once culturally monolithic. Because of travel, migration and media, people can actually experience the cultural differences that have traditionally separated communities, and in many cases those differences are manifested within a single local environment as people come together in common neighborhoods and cities. This diversity is slowly manifesting itself in multiple levels of society such as education, government, and business. As early as 1993 *TIME* magazine bore the lead title, "The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society."[1] The most recent US Census Bureau figures predict that by 2042 whites will be a "minority majority" within the United States.[2]

[1] *TIME,* Fall 1993.
[2] http://www.census.gov/main/www/access.html, accessed 9/18/19.

Yet despite this reality, Protestant American churches remains generally unresponsive to this new environment. The American church remains surprisingly homogenous, with only 12.5%[3] of Protestant churches qualifying as multi-ethnic congregations.[4] Among American Reformed congregations, the percentage is even smaller.[5] This is not to say that there is a lack of awareness of this new context of cultural pluralism; Chapter 1 will examine the various responses within the church to its diverse surroundings. But despite this awareness, despite the continuous call of church leaders for an inclusive response to diversity, despite the call to reclaim the missional identity of the church in a no longer monolithic Christendom culture, the ethnic composition of the church remains generally unchanged among the majority of Euro-American congregations in traditional denominations.

The thesis of this project is that at the heart of this situation is a crisis of the church's mission. Many missiologists have noted that the realities that globalization and cultural pluralism have created constitute a tremendous opportunity for the Western church. Missiologist Andrew Walls calls this moment in history an "Ephesian moment," referring to the unprecedented opportunity in the current chapter of the Western church to translate the Christian gospel into the lifeways of the world's cultures, even within a single local congregation.[6] This is undeniably true, but for the typical established American congregation, embracing this new missiological

[3] Figures vary on percentage of American Protestant Churches that qualify as multi-ethnic from about 7.5% to 12.5%. The 12.5% figure comes from 2010 Faith Communities Today survey of 11,000 American Protestant congregations, http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2010

[4] The generally accepted definition of a "multi-ethnic congregation" is one in which no one ethnic group makes up more than 80% of the congregation. See Ken Davis, "Multicultural Church Planting Models," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* (Spring 2003): 114-127. To further complicate matters, a church may be multi-ethnic yet mono-cultural, if a church is diverse ethnically but only practices one form of cultural expression. For the purposes of this project, I am using the term "multicultural contexts" to refer to an environment in which a congregation is located that is marked by the presence of people of diverse cultures, races and ethnicities.

[5] The largest American Reformed denomination, the PC(USA), is 9.8% multiethnic membership. Note that this minority membership mostly constitutes mono-ethnic minority congregations, not multi-ethnic congregations.

[6] Andrew F. Walls, "The Ephesian Moment," in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

opportunity also will involve embracing a theological and existential crisis. Moving toward inclusion of new ethnicities and cultures within the church is not simply a matter of adopting new programs and styles; it will inevitably include a crisis of theology that can bring a congregation's theological self-understanding into question. For this reason the exploration of the American church's response to its diverse contexts must be thoroughly *theological* rather than simply pragmatic.

It is the objective of this project to contribute toward this opportunity by constructing a missionary ecclesiology for congregations in multicultural contexts. The driving question of this project is: *What theological themes contribute to a missionary ecclesiology that is Reformed and also suitable for congregations operating in contexts of cultural plurality?* The goal is to construct an ecclesiology that is rooted and recognizable within the Reformed tradition, offering the particular contributions that the Reformed tradition proffers, yet hopefully one that also resonates with the broader ecumenical discussion about the contemporary missionary encounter with Western society. The reasons for this are:

1/ While all traditional Western denominations are struggling to adapt to the new secular, multicultural reality of the West, congregations within the Reformed tradition are especially resistant to adaptation and cultural change.[7] By using the Reformed movement as the focus of research, I've been able to narrow my research to a particular selection of congregations and though-leaders, while hopefully demonstrating a process of constructive theology that may benefit other Western theological traditions that are grappling with the same tension.

2/ While there is a surplus of literature on the missional church in North America, and plenty of books on multi-ethnic ministry, there have been few attempts to synthesize these

[7] This is the subject of Chapter 1.

conversations. The missional literature can at times be parochial in its cultural and theological outlook, keeping the conversation limited to broadly white evangelical communities, and focusing on the issue of secularism rather than multiculturalism, another salient feature of post-Christendom Western societies. On the other hand, the multi-cultural ministry literature can at times be oblivious to the missional conversation, focusing simply on equipping the church to reflect the diversity of the society around it and the complexities of church ministry in diverse congregations. Little attention has been given to how a missional ecclesiology actually propels a congregation toward greater solidarity with diverse neighbors, and can even catalyze a theological process that can bring judgment and reconstitution to the church that takes the risk to respond to its new pluralistic environment.

3/ The future of the church in in North America is a multicultural future. There are many American church leaders who are pursuing multi-ethnic and multi-cultural congregational ministry, have a collection of well-thought insights, and possess strong intuitions for the rightness of what they are doing. But there is a need for such insight and intuitions to become theologically institutionalized, for insight and intuition alone are not durable enough to ensure generational change. For this reason more work is needed to construct missionary ecclesiologies for contemporary churches in our new multicultural environments.

4/ Finally, among the impetuses for pursuing this project is a personal one. I am an evangelical Presbyterian pastor living in Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the Confederacy during the American Civil War. As I write this, our streets are flooded almost nighty with protestors demanding change in the light of killings of black Americans by police officers, and monuments to Confederate war heroes have been recently dismantled from their towering pedestals. People cry out for a "new Richmond," one that is not dominated by a culture

that once explicitly and now implicitly supports an ideology that values white culture and people as superior over others. And in a metro region that has one of the highest immigration and refugee settlement rates in the state, traditional black/white racial tensions are complicated by the viewpoints of new cultures that do not share our painful history.

It is in this context that I have wrestled with my own theological heritage in light of the *Missio Dei*. For eight years, I served as a co-pastor of a multi-ethnic congregation that I helped plant in an urban neighborhood. While our church remained in the Presbyterian denomination in which I was ordained, our church was constituted by a collection of people and leaders of diverse theological, denominational and cultural positions, a reality that became integral to pursuing the mission of God in the church's neighborhood and creating a diverse congregation. It was a constant process of theological and practical experimentation. Currently, I serve as pastor of large majority white Presbyterian congregation in the suburbs of the city. Now in a very different way, I continue to ask what it means to be faithful to our missionary calling in a diverse society, and what practical and theological sacrifices and innovations will be required to become a more hospitable, inclusive congregation. Many of my questions flow out of my experience the last fifteen years of pastoring in these environments. But even while my questions will be examined within the American Reformed context, it is my hope that the results of this project will be a resource to all those who wrestle with the tension between their theological heritage and the new multicultural environment of our mission in the West.

As stated above, the directing question of this project is: *What theological themes contribute to a missionary ecclesiology that is Reformed and also suitable for congregations operating in contexts of cultural plurality?* Chapter 1 will frame the problem, examining the obstacles that American Reformed congregations face in engaging with and incorporating

diverse peoples and cultures. Chapter 2 will develop a theological methodology for a fresh ecclesiological approach, proposing a dialogical interplay of ethnography and theology. Chapter 3 will present ethnographic research on three American Reformed congregations that are intentionally seeking to engage missionally with their multicultural environments, and suggest some valuable themes of their embodied beliefs and lived theologies that contribute to the project. Chapter 4 will deepen the conversation by assessing the formal ecclesiologies of three Reformed theologians and propose resources from their contributions. Finally, chapter 5 will bring the lived theologies of chapter 3 and the more formal theologies of chapter 4 into conversation, and seek to construct a Reformed ecclesiology for missional congregations in the multicultural West.

CHAPTER 1 : ASSESSING THE CHALLENGE

In order to construct a missionary ecclesiology for congregations in multicultural contexts, the challenge that lies before us must be assessed. What is the current state of the American Reformed movement when it comes to multiculturalism in local congregations? What are the barriers preventing the formation of congregations that are inclusive of diverse people? What is missing, malformed or simply broken that a fresh ecclesiology could help address? That is the intent of this first chapter.

Because it is impossible within the limitations of this project to examine the American church landscape as a whole, or even simply American Reformed denominations, my research in this chapter focuses on the two largest American Reformed Presbyterian denominations: the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The PC(USA) is the oldest Presbyterian denomination in the United States, consisting of 1,302,043 members and 9,451 congregations.[8] The PC(USA) is one of the nine so called "Mainline" American denominations. It is a theologically progressive denomination and also is one of the fastest declining denominations in the United States.[9] The PCA, though the second largest Presbyterian Reformed denomination, was founded relatively recently in 1973 as a split from the Presbyterian Church, US. The PCA consists of approximately 285,000 members and over 1700 congregations, and is growing at 1.5% per year. It is a theologically conservative denomination, prohibiting the ordination of women as pastors, elders or deacons, and holding other more theologically conservative views. Though the PC(USA) and the PCA are in many ways theological polarities, their multi-ethnic compositions are similar both among local congregations and ordained clergy.

[8] 2019 data, https://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2019_comparative_stats_080320.pdf, (accessed 10 August 2020).
[9] "Decline in US mainline denominations continues," *Christianity Today* (15 February 2010).

By examining the challenges these two denominations face when it comes to responding to cultural diversity, we can form a clearer understanding of the problem and why a fresh Reformed ecclesiology is necessary. To assess and understand why the American Reformed movement has such a difficult time fostering diverse congregations, I looked to four sources of information: 1/ Major Opinion Leaders within the PC(USA) and the PCA who can speak to the current state of their denominations as it relates to cultural diversity. The criterion for these thoughts leaders were a) a commitment to the local church and experience in pastoral ministry, b) academically oriented and capable of theological reflection, and c) influential in their denominational networks and looked to for opinions, insight and future direction. 2/ Cultural Minority Pastors within the PC(USA) and PCA who can speak to their own experience of laboring as a minority pastor within a majority white Reformed denomination, 3/ Denominational materials produced by the PC(USA) and the PCA, paying special attention to church polity documents, church planting documents, and other denominational materials that address the issue of cultural diversity and 4/ Books and monographs that address the history and theology of Reformed and other American denominations in relating to communities of diverse cultures.

There are three major categories we can use to assess the failures and struggles of the American Reformed movement in fostering diverse congregations and reaching non-white people groups, as told through interviews and the narratives of the PC(USA) and the PCA. These categories are History, Theology, and Culture. Each of these categories speaks to an ecclesiological deficiency that will help us begin to shape a fresh Reformed ecclesiology for multicultural congregations.

History

According to many interviewees, the root of the inability of the Reformation churches to reach non-European populations can be traced back as far as the Reformation itself. The 16th century Reformation was broadly speaking "a movement of academic scholars."[10] As Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA) stated, "It's extremely significant that [in the Reformation] they went from the vestments of the celebrant of the Mass to the attire of the scholar."[11] The Reformation was a movement of scholarship in that the catalyzing force of change was not spiritual experience but theological and biblical *insight*, fresh awareness into doctrines such as justification and imputed righteousness. As a result, the right understanding of theology and Scripture became the dominant means of grace, and those who handled this means of grace required adequate equipping. Thus a deep tradition was birthed within the Reformed movement that those called to professional ministry are highly educated, and this elevated emphasis on training and education of the pastoral leaders has had a corresponding impact on the congregations they lead. "It means that we have a deep, deep tradition of educated ministry, and therefore we have a tendency [to attract] middle and upper middle class people," Keller states. "We do not know what to do with people groups who are not highly educated, in which they do not have the same tradition of education."[12] Similarly, John Frame, PCA theologian, writes, "[The Reformed approach] appeals to the well-educated, who are also often the relatively wealthy members of society. It tends to turn away others, in the present case the relatively poor minorities."[13]

[10] John M. Frame, (n.d.). "Minorities and the Reformed Church." http://www.frame-poythress.org/minorities-and-the-reformed-church/ (accessed 15 October 2015).
[11] Timothy J. Keller. Personal interview. 13 August 2013.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] Frame.

Doug Logan, an African-American pastor within the PCA, connects this history of the Reformed emphasis on the learned ministry to the inability of American Presbyterians to recruit minority leaders. "High barriers are created that make it very difficult for people from sub-dominant cultures to enter into the ordination process," states Logan.[14] In both the PCA and the PC(USA), the requirement for ordained ministry is a four year undergraduate degree plus a three year Masters of Divinity degree at a theologically accredited institution, an education which includes training in Old and New Testament, Church History, Reformed Theology, Practical Theology, as well as Greek and Hebrew. Logan continues, "There is a strong requirement for seminary education, the expectation being that it will involve full time graduate work in a new location. It is a very rigid system and very expensive, and it has little flexibility for people like me who may be gifted for ministry but lack a college education, net worth, and the support structures that many of my white counterparts possess."[15] The theological movement that birthed the egalitarian concept of "the priesthood of all believers" ironically created a "new sacerdotalism," in the words of one minority PC(USA) pastor.[16] The priest at the altar was replaced by a scholar in the pulpit, a position that few leaders from sub-dominant cultures have been able to access.

This history in the Reformed tradition has shaped not only who leads and who constitutes local congregations, but also what kind of cultures of spirituality are created within local communities. The heavy emphasis upon the mind and rational comprehension of doctrine "discouraged the emotionally demonstrative," erecting barriers against people groups and cultures that have historically emphasized experience and emotion, thus fueling "the ethnic

[14] Doug Logan. Personal interview. 19 April 2013.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] Jin S. Kim. Personal interview. 13 February 2014.

hyper-uniformity" of Reformed congregations.[17] There is not simply one way of knowing, insists Korean-American PC(USA) pastor Jin S. Kim. Yet despite the variegated ways of knowing and experiencing God, "white [Presbyterians] are not willing to give up their epistemological dominance."[18] The "normal" Reformed way of experiencing God is through the faithful acquisition of knowledge of God, not through experience or emotion. The Reformed creeds and catechisms, for example, are not basic summaries of faith like the Apostle's or Nicene Creeds, but are rather finely argued miniature theological treatises, to which catechumenates are expected to subscribe as a sign of their commitment to the faith. To many ethnic minorities, this historic emphasis on rational approbation reflects a cultural myopia. The white evangelical and Reformed movement, writes Harold Dean Trulear, African American Professor of Applied Theology at Howard University School of Divinity, "persists as a movement based on rational assent to propositional orthodoxy, especially in its educational and other institutional forms."[19] In many minority communities, individual and social experiences are just as important in acquiring knowledge of God and measuring spiritual faithfulness as rational comprehension of doctrine. "The bifurcation between theology and ethics is untenable for those who come from communities where the confession and practice of faith are inextricably linked," writes African-American Professor Vincent Bacote.[20] The African-American religious tradition, which historically has emphasized creative style and artistry in musical worship, as well as a deeply personal and emotional spirituality, has found the highly rationalistic forms of Reformed worship

[17] Frame.
[18] Kim.
[19] Harold Dean Trulear, "Blacks and Latinos in Theological Education as Professors and Administrators," in Anthony B. Bradley, ed., *Aliens in the Promised Land* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2013), 85.
[20] Vincent Bacote, "Ethnic Scarcity in Evangelical Theology: Where are the Authors?", in Bradley, ed., *Aliens*, 84.

and Christian practice unappealing and unwelcoming.[21] Thus the historic emphasis on the mind, and the congregational cultures created around the acquisition of doctrinal knowledge as a fundamental form of faithful spirituality, has helped produce homogenous congregations that are unfriendly toward people groups with different epistemologies and spiritual practices.

Moving beyond the Reformation, many interviewees also point to the history of racism and minority oppression in the United States as a key to understanding the current homogeneity of the Reformed movement. "The original sin of America," writes Korean American scholar Soong-Chan Rah, is "the kidnapping of Africans to use as slave labor, the usurping of lands belonging to Native Americans and the subsequent genocide of indigenous peoples."[22] These horrific transgressions have left an indelible mark on the United States and not least the American Church, which continues to reap significant social and corporate consequences from these historic injustices. Though few practicing Christians would ever defend these atrocities or express overt racism today, the institutional and denominational systems have been built upon the foundations of these historic sins, thus quietly perpetuating their power. "The greatest wounds in human history, the greatest injustices, have not happened through the acts of some individual perpetrator, rather through the institutions, systems, philosophies, cultures, religions and governments of mankind."[23] The Reformed movement in the United States was especially marked by an institutional complicity in America's racial offenses. Historian George Marsden writes, "In the deep South, Reformed people were adamantly opposed to any interference with the practice of black slavery and emphasized aspects of the tradition that favored confining the

[21] See Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black and Presbyterian*: *The Heritage and the Hope* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 1983), 82-83.
[22] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 69.
[23] John Dawson, *Healing America's Wounds* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1977), 30.

activities of the church to strictly 'spiritual' issues."[24] Many American Reformed theologians such as Jonathan Edwards[25] and Charles Hodge[26] quietly acquiesced to the realities of race-based slavery, while others like Robert L. Dabney were outright supporters of Antebellum slavery.[27] Under the direction or the passivity of such leaders, in some cases Reformed theology became a tool for the perpetration of racial segregation and injustice. For example, many minority Reformed leaders have noted that the classic Reformed doctrine of predestination has been historically implemented as a justification for social inequities. Dr. Brian Blount, African American PC(USA) pastor and President of Union Presbyterian Seminary, states that "the most damaging distortion of the Reformed tradition to creating multicultural realities is predestination…. If certain things are predestined and I am at the bottom of the social scale, then I may be predestined to be there."[28] Unlike Baptist and Methodist congregations who made much bolder efforts toward emancipation, the Presbyterian Church as a whole emphasized the *education* of the slaves rather than their emancipation, thus honoring the "God-ordained" position of the slave and master.[29] Furthermore, this theologically defended form of social fatalism had almost certain impact on the lack of evangelistic fervor among American

[24] George M. Marsden, "Introduction: Reformed and American," in David F. Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 6.
[25] See Richard A. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Bailey offers evidence of the racialized perceptions of New Englanders like Edwards as they sought to justify and control their experiences with New Englanders of color.
[26] Charles Hodge was Professor of Systematic Theology and Principal at Princeton Theological Seminary, 1851-1878. Hodge was a "gradualist" when it came to slavery, arguing that immediate emancipation would cause civil upheaval. He also was an advocate for extradition of freed slaves to the republic of Liberia. See Paul C. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[27] Robert L. Dabney was a Southern Presbyterian Pastor and Confederate Army Chaplain in the American Civil War. He was a chief theological supporter of race-based slavery and continued to speak and publish on the defense of slavery in the post-Civil War South. His mark remains strong on the Southern American Presbyterian Tradition. He was the founder of Austin Presbyterian Seminary PC(USA) and a faculty member of Union Theological Seminary PC(USA), and still has many adherents and admirers within the PCA. See Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005).
[28] Brian Blount. Personal interview. 19 March 2013.
[29] Wilmore, 32.

Presbyterians to non-white populations. PCA Theologian John Frame notes the reality that "although there is an African-American Methodist denomination, and various African-American Baptist conventions, there is no African-American Presbyterian or Reformed fellowship."[30] Anthony Carter, black Reformed pastor, credits this directly to the distorted use of the doctrine of predestination which historically became understood "as more fatalistic than biblical….The result of this lack of initiative on the part of the Reformed heritage has been the scarcity of predominantly black churches in the Reformed tradition."[31] In general, in more "evangelical" churches like Baptists and Methodist congregations, "Africans found greater freedom of worship under their own leaders, a more easily understood doctrine, and more consistent opposition to slavery."[32] The Reformed movement in America carries still the ineffaceable impact of its historic participation in race-based oppression and segregation.

As the Reformed movement grew in America, its success was inevitably built along the grain of its historic segregationist practices. The history of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) is a helpful example of this. The RCA traces its roots to the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands.[33] When the Dutch East India Company founded New Amsterdam in 1609, the developing colony requested an established church. In 1628 Dominee Jonas Michaelius arrived in New Amsterdam from the Netherlands as the first minister of the Reformed Church.[34] To be expected, the church focused exclusively on serving the Dutch families of the new colony. Little to no evangelistic effort was made to reach out to local Native American populations, and the church principally grew through the expansion of Dutch families and new immigrants from the

[30] Frame.
[31] Anthony Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 71.
[32] Wilmore, 26.
[33] The Dutch Reformed Church changed its name to the Reformed Church in America (RCA) in 1867.
[34] Howard Hageman, *Lily Among Thorns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Half Moon Press, 1956), 58.

Netherlands. As decades passed and the United States achieved independence, the Dutch Reformed Church established new congregations mostly in the Northeast and Midwest through the migration of Dutch families. Few if any attempts were made to plant churches among people groups of other nationalities, and a strong commitment to the Dutch language and culture slowed assimilation. It would be over 200 years from its founding that the Dutch Reformed church would establish a church outside the Northeast or Midwest and among non-Dutch origin people. Overall, the denomination grew in numbers for over 300 years, but almost entirely by reaching Dutch populations.[35]

In a new society with a deep commitment to church disestablishment, congregations like those in the RCA primarily grew through aggregating voluntary communities of similar people groups. Sociologists Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith argue that the organization of American religion can be described with the metaphor of a "religious marketplace," a distinctly American phenomenon that developed with "the separation of church and state, leading to religious pluralism, increased competition, and a growing emphasis on personal choice. These factors mean that religious congregations need to specialize and market their services to survive and grow…and these processes strongly encourage homogeneity *within* congregations."[36] As denominations and congregations "specialized" in reaching distinct people groups, "the irony of religion's role is that in strengthening micro bonds between individuals, religion contributes to within-group homogeneity, heightens isolation from different groups, and reduces the opportunity for the formation of macro bonds—bonds between groups—that serve to integrate a society."[37] This approach to congregational and denominational growth proved extremely

[35] For a fuller recounting of the history of the RCA, see Gary L. McIntosh and Alan McMahan, *Being the Church in a Multi-ethnic Community* (Indianapolis, IN: Weslyan Publishing House, 2012), 75-77.
[36] Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136.
[37] *Ibid*., 155.

effective, yet it also served to deepen homogenous networks, thereby consolidating racial division. "Thus religion – especially 'strong' religion – both helps to create racially distinctive networks and, in using them as the basis for congregational and denominational growth, helps maintain and justify them."[38]

This principle of segregated growth in the American Protestant movement is reflected clearly in the American Reformed traditions, as evidenced by the case of the RCA above. As noted, the Reformed emphasis on the rational commitment to orthodox doctrine as a principle means of grace, the exclusion of experiential and emotive forms of spirituality, and the complicity of the Reformed movement in oppressive and segregationist practices all helped to develop an American Presbyterian tradition in which white homogeneity was virtually ensured. "The success of the Presbyterian church became its albatross," states PC(USA) pastor Dr. Brian Blount. "It became a place where people who were successful in life, who had done well in family and relationships [gathered], and they built these communities that looked like them, and they established these communities successfully and endowed them well. In all of this they were building up barriers to other people who were different."[39] African-American PCA pastor and professor Anthony Bradley makes the same case with even stronger language. In the evangelical conservative PCA denomination, the "Homogenous Unit Principle" was often explicitly used as a way to defend the growth of the denomination among culturally similar people.[40] "In the 1980s and 1990s," states Anthony Bradley, "The PCA became first and foremost a shire for

[38] *Ibid.*, 161.
[39] Blount.
[40] The "Homogenous Unit Principle" (HUP) is a missionary principle developed by Fuller Seminary Professors Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner. The HUP is grounded in the belief that numerical growth in a congregation is the truest criteria of spiritual maturity. Given the imperative for numerical growth, HUP advocates argue that evangelism and mission are most effective when people do not have to cross racial, linguistic or class barriers to access the gospel. Thus homogenous congregations, it is argued, are the most effective way to spread the gospel. See C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Regal Books, 1976).

social and political conservatives gathered around like minded others sharing political allegiances lived out in church life in distinction from liberal Protestants."[41] The rapid growth of the PCA in the 1980s and 1990s especially in the Suburban Southern United States, claims Bradley, was driven by "the use of the homogenous unit principle, church planting strategies centered on small groups, doing demographic analysis to plant churches in neighborhoods where the PCA's social conservative culture already was established."[42] Because Presbyterian denominations like the PCA were developed around the collecting of like-minded educated middle and upper class white populations, it ensured that outreach into minority populations would be unsuccessful "unless outlier minorities socially conformed by adopting the same cultural values of white socio-political conservatives."[43] Bradley refers to this as "planned apartheid,"[44] a commitment to plant churches and grow existing churches around known responsive selective factors without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.

Whether it be in explicit forms of racial segregation and theological justifications of slavery, or in more passive forms of cultural separation through particular epistemological theological orientations and isolationist church growth practices, the history of the Reformed movement in the United States has contributed to its current position as a mostly white, middle to upper middle class clustering of homogenous denominations. All of these factors have significant connections with theology, the subject we turn to next.

---

[41] Anthony Bradley (February 2011). "The PCA: a clustering of political and social conservatives and city center elites" [Blog post] http://bradley.chattablogs.com/archives/2011/02/pca-a-cultural.html. (accessed 15 October 2014).
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*
[44] Bradley, *Aliens in the Promised Land*, 32, cit. Rowland Croucher et. al., "Church Growth and Pastoral Stress," John Mark Ministries, May 23, 2002, http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/9680.htm.

Theology

"What does Reformed theology say about racism?" asks Carl Ellis, African-American PCA pastor. "It doesn't."[45] This is a refrain heard again and again from minority pastors in the American Presbyterian traditions. By this Ellis does not mean that Reformed Theology has no *implications* for addressing racism and racial injustice; he means that the great majority of Reformed Theology has been carried out from the perspective of the dominant culture, a culture that has had no need to address directly the concerns of sub-dominant communities. "Reformed theology has only been applied or done in this country from the dominant cultural perspective, and thus it has not addressed the core concerns of the subdominant cultures," states Ellis.[46] Of course, this reality is not limited to the Reformed tradition, as Anthony Carter notes. "The sad yet irrefutable fact is that the theology of Western Christianity, dominated by white males, has had scant if any direct answers to the evils of racism and the detrimental effects of institutionalized discrimination. The major contributors to…theological thought over the centuries have, consciously or not, spoken predominantly to and for white people."[47] Yet given the enormous impact the Reformed community has had on the development of Western theological thought, its failure to address such colossal societal issues as racism and segregation is particularly obvious.

Former Fuller Seminary President and PC(USA) pastor Richard Mouw points out that there has been a serious "disconnect" between the profound truths of Reformed theology and the realities of the broken world which it has significant potential to address. Because Reformed

[45] Carl Ellis. Personal interview. 2 April 2013.
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] Carter, 6.

Theology has been carried out mainly in the theater of cultural power and privilege, especially in the United States, it has often failed to see and hear the concerns of communities outside those realms of power. Mouw tells the story of an incident he experienced as a young 20-year-old seminarian:

> I was at Western Seminary in Holland Michigan, and we always did preaching things over the weekends. I went to Indiana to one of the Dutch Reformed communities. In those days you stayed with an elder. I arrived one Saturday – lovely Dutch lay people. At dinner that night, and this was the custom, the father would read a chapter of the Bible, and they would go through the whole Bible in about two years. At the end of the meal he said in a very moving way, "That reminds me of Heidelberg [Catechism] 1: My only comfort in life and death is that I am not my own, but that I belong to Jesus Christ." He really testified to what that meant to him.
>
> So [after dinner] we go to the living room. This was the early 1960s, and we turn on the television set and there on the screen is Martin Luther King Jr. doing an open housing march. The father of the family started to say horrible things about King, that he was a communist, etcetera. I am a 20-year-old seminarian, and I got really angry. We had this big fight – it was awful. At one point he pounded his fist on the table and said, "I don't want those people moving into my neighborhood. What I've got, I got on my own and nobody is going to take it away from me!"
>
> Later on reflecting on that in the guest bedroom, I thought: Here is a guy who 40 minutes before said "My only comfort in life and death is that I am not my own, that I belong to Jesus Christ," and now he is saying, "What I've got, I've got on my own." The connection between Heidelberg 1 and racism is a profound one. I believe that once you've said Heidelberg 1, you've got to belong to everything that Jesus belongs to.[48]

This story speaks in a personal way of a failure to connect the truths of Reformed theology with socio-cultural realities that especially affect non-white populations. Mouw argues that what is wrong with Reformed Theology is not so much its content as its "configuration," the perspective, order and application by which it approaches the glorious truths it articulates. In a recent book on Christology, Mouw points out the propensity in Reformed Christology to move quickly over the empathic aspects of Christ's suffering or even an unwillingness to address those aspects at all. He addresses the ways John Calvin, Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof and Abraham Kuyper among

[48] Richard Mouw. Personal interview. 26 June 2013.

other Reformed Theologians are so keen to emphasize the utter uniqueness of Christ's substitutionary sufferings on humanity's behalf that they rarely if ever touch on the concern of the Savior to suffer in solidarity with suffering humanity.[49] "Why is there such a failure in so much of Reformed theology to linger over the shared-suffering aspect of Christ's incarnational mission?" asks Mouw.[50] Surely because of the deep concern of Reformed theologians to preserve the unbridgeable ontological gap between God and humanity, affirming that even in the Incarnation Jesus Christ remains wholly other and his vicarious suffering distinct from humanity's. "The Reformed have seen it as their special calling to protect that gap against any doctrine that might seem to compromise it," writes Mouw.[51] But this concern also serves to limit the capacity of Reformed theology to recognize the identification of Christ with the deepest hurts and hopes of the human community, especially those members who are outside the perimeters of power. Mouw's aim is not to discard the essential commitments of Reformed Christology and its desire to protect the ontological gap between God and humanity, but to supplement the teachings in such a way that provide a more compassionate Christology which can make room for the concerns of the suffering other. "Our formal theological prescriptions need to be more interactive with an immersion in the realities of the human condition," Mouw writes.[52] His concern is one that was already being formed as a young man in the living room of the Dutch Reformed elder, as Mouw wrestled to understand the disconnect between Reformed theology and the realities of the broken world.

[49] Nicholas Wolterstorff argues otherwise about John Calvin in his essay "The Wounds of God: Calvin's Theology of Social Injustice." Wolterstorff contends that Calvin departed from his Augustinian roots and taught that "behind and beneath the social misery of our world is the suffering of God." Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 119.
[50] Richard J. Mouw and Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 52.
[51] *Ibid*., 54.
[52] *Ibid*., 66.

In many cases this disconnect between theology and the concerns of the suffering world has been unconscious, but in other cases in the Reformed tradition it has been explicit. A particularly distinct ecclesiological doctrine within the conservative American Presbyterian movement has been the notion of the "spirituality of the church." Attributed to American Reformed theologians James Henley Thornwell,[53] Charles Hodge and Robert Lewis Dabney,[54] the doctrine of the "spirituality of the church" asserts a stark division between civil and ecclesiastical spheres and confines the church's responsibilities to "spiritual matters," because "the church is a spiritual institution with a spiritual task and spiritual means for executing that task."[55] Intended as a theological measure to protect the church from political and social manipulation, the doctrine was implemented heavily by Southern Presbyterians during the Civil War, Reconstruction and later throughout the 20th Century civil rights era to defend slavery, Jim Crow laws and segregation, to preserve the status quo, and to abdicate general responsibility in socio-political affairs. In 1942, the founder and editor of the Southern Presbyterian Journal, L. Nelson Bell, attacked the National Council of Churches for its declarations opposing racial segregation. "The (National) Council has caused confusion and resentment by constant meddling in economic, social and racial matters," he wrote.[56] Later in 1945 Bell wrote of the inverse relationship between ecclesiastical focus on social issues and "evangelical power," insisting that

[53] See "Lecture 7: The Spirituality of God," in J.B. Adger, ed., *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell: Theological, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Committee of Publication), 173–188.
[54] See footnote 27.
[55] D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, "The Spirituality of the Church," *Ordained Servant* vol. 7, no. 3 (July 1998), 64-66.
[56] Kenneth Taylor, "The Spirituality of the Church: Segregation, The Presbyterian Journal, and the Origins of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1942-1973," *Reformed Perspectives Magazine*, Volume 9, Number 34 (August 19 to August 25, 2007), cit. L. Nelson Bell, "Why," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 1 (May 1942): 2-3, quoted in Frank Joseph Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 2d. ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Scholars Pres, 1999).

"the Gospel of Jesus Christ concerns not ethic, morality, and social policies."[57] In 1954, in reaction to the decision of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (US) to support the racial integration of the public schools, the session of First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi stated its strong opposition to the General Assembly's Actions:

> "The Session does not feel that the Presbyterian Church in the United States should take any action with reference to current social, political and economic problems…an organized church should exist only for the purpose of stimulating and strengthening its members and for coordinating and implementing their activities in bringing others to know Him and serve Him."[58]

First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi would later become one of the founding congregations of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in 1973, in reaction to a perceived increasing liberalism in the mainline Presbyterian denomination. Though the doctrine of the spirituality of the church has received serious theological critique in recent years even from those within the PCA, the doctrine continues to haunt conservative American Presbyterianism and has ongoing impact on the failure of conservative Presbyterians to foster diverse congregations. "The Reformed version of Anabaptist isolationism is the spirituality of the church," states Timothy Keller. "[People say] we're here to save souls, period, not to get involved in any of these racial and social issues."[59] Jeff White, a PCA pastor who planted a multicultural congregation in Harlem, NY and often speaks out on social and racial issues, affirms that "there are many people who still subscribe to the spirituality of church…In light of my work, I have been confronted by people who have said I am disobeying or that I am not taking into account the spirituality of the church."[60] Anthony Bradley, African American PCA pastor, writes that conservative Reformed

---

[57] Adam Borneman (9 October 2013). "Presbyterians, Civil Rights, and the Spirituality of the Church: A Brief Historical Survey" [Blog post] Retrieved from http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/presbyterians-civil-rights-and-the-spirituality-of-the-church-a-brief-historical-survey/

[58] cited in Peter Slade, *Open Friendship in a Closed Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108, citing The Southern Presbyterian Journal, 19 June 1957, p.8.

[59] Keller.

[60] Jeff White. Personal interview. 13 August 2013.

denominations like the PCA will make only very minimal progress in fostering multi-ethnicity in their churches because "they are not only culturally captive to white Western norms, but also have embraced the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, which has provided an excuse for not speaking to issues like racial segregation."[61] Such leaders in conservative Presbyterianism clearly view this historic theological commitment to the separation of the church from the socio-political sphere as an ongoing inhibitor to the church's mission to seek out and welcome non-white populations.

Even as explicit references to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church have waned, the spirit of its theology endures within conservative Presbyterianism. In reviewing the Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America, there is not a single reference in sixty-one chapters to race, justice, or the calling of the church to be an agent of social or racial reconciliation in the world.[62] In Chapter 3, in which the church is defined, the Book of Order states, "The sole functions of the church, as a kingdom and government distinct from the civil commonwealth, are to proclaim, to administer, and to enforce the law of Christ revealed in the Scriptures…the power of the church is exclusively spiritual."[63] The identity and mission of the church within the governing documents of the PCA are given clear theological boundaries within "spiritual" matters that have no explicit relevance to social and racial concerns. In the church planting documents of the PCA, though there is no theological rationale given for planting of diverse or multi-ethnic congregations, there does exist an auxiliary document that states, "The key to a vibrant future PCA in a changing culture is that we become highly skilled in the contextualization of the Gospel in an ever changing and increasingly heterogeneous and

[61] Anthony B. Bradley, "General Introduction: My Story," in Bradley, ed. *Aliens in the Promised Land*, 16-17.
[62] *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America,* 6th Ed., (Lawrenceville, GA: The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America).
[63] *Ibid.,* 3-3 and 3-4.

pluralistic American culture."[64] This is hopeful, but the content of the paper is almost entirely practical, offering pragmatic guidance for identifying minority leaders and instructions in implementing programs such as ESL (English as a Second Language) to attract minority members. But no *theological* critique or development is offered to shape a more robust theology of the church that can broaden its mission to incorporate engagement in social, cultural and racial concerns.

In their book *Divided By Faith*, sociologists Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson demonstrate that this reductionist understanding of the identity and calling of the church is endemic to American conservative evangelicalism. "Because evangelicals view their primary task as evangelism and discipleship, they tend to avoid issues that hinder these activities," they write. "So, despite having the subcultural tools to call for radical changes in race relations, they most consistently call for changes in persons that leave the dominant social structures, institutions, and culture intact."[65] Soong-Chan Rah also points out that a preoccupation with the salvation of the individual soul in conservative and evangelical American theologies has prevented the church from dealing with immoral systemic and corporate realities.[66] This has been undoubtedly true in the conservative American Reformed movement. If anything, the strong commitment to the preservation of Reformed orthodoxy in a secularizing culture, combined with a theological commitment to the isolation of the church from "non-spiritual" matters, has served to deepen and even intensify the American Presbyterian church's homogeneity. Indeed, at times it appears that terms like "multiculturalism" are viewed as almost synonymous with "relativism" and "liberalism." Thabiti Anyabwile, a Caribbean-American Reformed pastor, notes that when

[64] *Ministering Among the Changing Cultures of North America* (Lawrenceville, GA: Mission to North America, 2005).
[65] Smith and Emerson, 21.
[66] Rah, 41.

white Reformed and evangelical leaders hear the term "multiculturalism," "they stiffen their backs to defend the idea of absolute truth against 'postmodern relativity.'"[67] Anyabwile points out that cultural diversity is often perceived as a theological *hazard* that threatens the heart of Reformed orthodoxy, rather than an opportunity for mission. Timothy Keller also confirms that when many of his PCA colleagues hear the word diversity, "they feel like that's the camel's nose in the tent… When they see [liberals] using the diversity card to go over the line into what is clearly unbiblical…then they don't want to hear any talk about diversity. They've had it."[68] What's clear is that the same concern that led the PCA to break away from the mainline Presbyterian denomination, i.e. its increasing liberalism as it took explicit stands on social and cultural issues, continues to fuel concerns today among conservative Presbyterians as they face the possibility of embracing diverse cultures within the church. The resulting cultural homogeneity within the conservative Reformed movement is not just a sociological phenomenon but is also a consequence of *theological* commitments: Cultural diversity is perceived as a theological deviation from the core of what the church is meant to be and to do in the world.

When assessing the theological commitments of the progressive PC(USA) denomination, the disparities could hardly be more divergent. As early as the 1950s, we see evidence of mainline Reformed leaders denouncing racial segregation as a *theological* heresy. At the 1953 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church US,[69] a committee was appointed to consider racial segregation and to make a recommendation. The committee drafted "A Statement to

[67] Thabiti Anyabwile (26 March 2013) "Another Point Where Wilson and I Almost Entirely Agree: On Doing History and Multiculturalism" http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabitianyabwile/2013/03/26/another-point-where-wilson-and-i-almost-entirely-agree-on-doing-history-and-multiculturalism/ (accessed 10 August 2020).
[68] Keller.
[69] The Presbyterian Church US was formed in 1861 as a Southern schism from the national Presbyterian Church USA, due to anger over the Civil War and the southern Presbyterian's commitment to slavery and segregation. The two denominations reunited in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (USA). The feared reunion was partly responsible for the swiftness of the founders of the PCA to form their own breakaway denomination in 1973. See Taylor, *Ibid.*

Southern Christians," and among its recommendations it included, "That the General Assembly affirm that enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is *out of harmony with Christian theology* and ethics and that the church, in its relationships to cultural patterns, should lead rather than follow."[70] A few years later, in direct opposition to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, a collective of Presbyterian leaders issued a statement declaring, "Reformed theology finds its foundation in the understanding that God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ is the sovereign of all of life. The false interpretation of 'the spirituality of the church,' which has so gripped our denomination from the time of slavery, has vitiated this theological understanding of the sovereignty of God and has helped us to withdraw from the practical affairs of the world."[71] The accumulating opposition to segregation among progressive Reformed leaders was strikingly *theological* in scope, arguing that classic Reformed doctrines such as the sovereignty of God call the segregationist practices of the Presbyterians churches into question.

Over the following years, the mainline PC(USA) has consistently made a concerted effort to acknowledge the reality of cultural diversity and to call congregations to a faithful response. The PC(USA) created The Mission of Multicultural Congregational Support with a full-time director, staff support, grants and significant web resources. The General Assembly of the PC(USA) has a full-time "Associate for Racial and Cultural Diversity." In 1998 the General Assembly committed to increasing its "overall ethnic membership" to 20% by 2010. Yet even more notably, this commitment to multiculturalism and racial diversity is not simply expressed as a practical strategic concern, but is also backed *theologically* within the most important

[70] Minutes of the Ninety-Fourth General Assembly Meeting in Montreat, NC, in 1954, cit. in Borneman, *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.
[71] Marthame E. Sanders III, "A Fellowship of Concern' and the Declining Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Presbyterian Church in the United States," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-) Vol. 75, No. 3 (Fall 1997), 183.

documents of the denomination. There are numerous references to racial justice, cultural diversity and mission to new populations within the PC(USA) *Book of Order,* statements that link these commitments to the theological identity and mission of the church. For example:

> "The Church is called to a new openness to its own membership, by affirming itself as a community of diversity, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races, and conditions, and by providing for inclusiveness as a visible sign of the new humanity." (PC(USA) *Book of Order* G-3.0401b)
>
> "The Church in its witness to the uniqueness of the Christian faith is called to mission and must be responsive to the diversity in both the church and the world. Thus the fellowship of Christians as it gathers for worship and orders its corporate life will display a rich variety of form, practice, language, program, nurture, and service to suit culture and need." (PC(USA) *Book of Order,* G-4.0401)
>
> "The Presbyterian Church (USA) shall give full expression to the rich diversity within its membership and shall provide means which will assure a greater inclusiveness leading to wholeness in its emerging life. Persons of all racial ethnic groups, different ages, both sexes, various disabilities, diverse geographical areas, different theological positions consistent with the Reformed tradition, as well as different marital conditions (married, single, widowed, or divorced) shall be guaranteed full participation and access to representation in the decision making of the church." (PC(USA) *Book of Order,* G-9.0104ff)[72]

In stark contrast to the governing documents of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the PC(USA) views cultural diversity as important to the identity and mission of the church and expresses such commitments in its central theological documents.

Going a little deeper, in 1999 the General Assembly of the PC(USA) adopted *A Vision for Church Growth in the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, a wide-ranging strategy to meet the challenge of reaching un-churched people and minister to many different racial and ethnic challenges in the new millennium. A series of booklets was produced to address the various aspects of this vision, one of which explicitly addresses the desire for more multicultural churches. *Living the Vision: Becoming a Multicultural Church* is one of these booklets which

[72] References from *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, *Part II: Book of Order, 2011-2013* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly), 2011.

seeks to present some biblical foundations for a multicultural vision of the church, the major challenges facing congregations in becoming multicultural, and some ideas and solutions for working toward diversity.[73] Several commendable themes emerge that reflect the general posture of the PC(USA) toward cultural pluralism.

First, the booklet reflects *an Attitude that views Diversity as Opportunity rather than Threat.* As noted earlier, many of the conservative Reformed churches and denominations speak about the growing diversity in the United States as strictly a matter of challenge and threat. In contrast, the PC(USA) materials state that "we are being given a particularly awesome opportunity to witness by our actions, not just our words, to the reconciling love of God for all peoples."[74] There is an acknowledgment that our particular cultural moment affords a unique opportunity. "The *opportunities* offered by the multicultural journey are great indeed. The idea of opportunity suggests that we not live in *a time particularly favorabl*e to the carrying out of God's purposes for God's church."[75] Some leaders even go beyond the opportunity language and describe this reality as a gift: "In God's providence, we have been placed in a multicultural world. We are blessed by being in America where we are called to witness to Christ's power to break down all walls that divide. This is a gift of immense urgency and opportunity."[76] Though the language of challenge is sometimes employed to describe our new multicultural environment, the word "threat" is conspicuously absent.

Second, *A Commitment to Change.* There is a commendable willingness expressed within many of the PC(USA) documents to adapt and change to the new diverse cultural environment.

---

[73] Sarah Parker and Raafat Girgis, *Living the Vision: Becoming a Multicultural Church* (Louisville, KY: Congregational Ministries Publishing for Evangelism and Witness Ministries of the General Assembly Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2005).
[74] *Ibid*., 5.
[75] *Ibid.,* 21. Emphasis theirs.
[76] Mark Smutny, "Building an Inclusive Church in a Multicultural World: Principles for Effective Multicultural Ministry" (2002), quoted in Parker and Girgis, 21.

Sometimes this commitment is stated in confrontational terms: "Are we willing to ask ourselves this crucial question: is our preference for homogenous, 'voluntary fellowships' of like-minded folk, those just like me, that typify Presbyterian congregations an expression of some perceived *right* based on sound biblical teaching - or is it in fact a justification of longstanding social preferences and values of ourselves that we do not wish to confront?"[77] Other times this willingness to change is reflected in a sober acknowledgement that the majority of PC(USA) churches do not reflect the changing demographics of the broader society.

Third, *A Critical Cultural Awareness.* Within the PC(USA) documents there is a recognition that our traditional forms of theology and communication are captive to cultural forces that may need challenge and subversion. "Every congregation must find ways to recognize and confront the pervasive and often unconscious roles of racism and privilege. To face racism, classism and sexism requires a conscious effort by all who benefit from the system of power and privilege."[78] There is an awareness that simple tolerance will not overcome the barriers that often divide people and congregations, and attitudes that do not take cultural differences seriously "in fact feed the ethnocentric rationale for assimilation into the dominant group."[79] This applies to major factors like how a congregation worships in corporate gatherings, and seemingly insignificant factors like how people communicate within small groups.[80] The way we speak, listen, sing, communicate and even do theology are inevitably shaped by our cultures, and these documents take that formation seriously in order to overcome invisible barriers that divide communities.

---

[77] *Ibid.,* 27.
[78] *Ibid.,* 26.
[79] *Ibid.,* 28.
[80] *Ibid.,* 31f, 40, 53-64.

In sum, *Living the Vision* is a thoughtful document that offers a bold vision for PC(USA) congregations to take up the challenge of multicultural congregational life. It is full of practical guidance for how churches can seek out interaction with diverse people groups, nurture multicultural leadership, and foster trust and healthy communication within multicultural congregations. And it seeks to build a biblical and theological foundation for its recommendations, grounding its call to diversity on more than just sociological and practical concerns.

In light of this review of PC(USA) post-1950s history, its constitutional documents and related auxiliary papers addressing the specific issue of diversity, a glaring question remains: why does the PC(USA) remain so homogenous? Why does its theological commitment to diversity and multiculturalism, so frequently and at times eloquently expressed, not seem to match its reality on the local congregational level? The reasons are numerous and the sections above and below on history[81] and culture[82] further elaborate, but our purpose in this section is to examine the *theological* explanations for the intractable ethnic homogeneity in each of these American Reformed denominations. Whereas in the conservative Reformed movement there is clear theological resistance to incorporating multiculturalism into the identity and calling of the church, the progressive Reformed movement appears eager to expand the parameters of the gospel to include social and racial concerns and is enthusiastic about an ecclesiology that incorporates cultural inclusivity in its scope. Yet when it comes to actually fostering diverse local congregations and incorporating the increasingly diverse populations of the United States, the results in the PCA and PC(USA) are nearly identical.

[81] See pp.6-14.
[82] See pp. 31-36.

At least two reasons are given by Reformed leaders for the failure of the well-intentioned theology of the PC(USA) to make an impact. First, interviewees noted the disconnect between the noble theology in the constitutional documents and the actual theology implemented on the ground. Richard Mouw, PC(USA) pastor and former President of Fuller Seminary, has overseen the training of hundreds of PC(USA) pastors and has visited as many PC(USA) congregations. Yet Mouw sees a profound disconnect between the lofty theological language of the Book of Order and the lived practice of the general PC(USA) leader. "Ministers will sign documents about racial justice," states Mouw, "but there is very little Reformed grappling with the issue from a theological perspective." Mouw sees the issue often touted as one of "racial justice" yet the language often lacks spiritual and theological clarity and passion. "I don't find the kind of liberal PC(USA) churches very exciting when it comes to this issue of race," Mouw continues. "In one sense they are committed, but it doesn't become a very vital spiritual drive."[83] Dr. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary (PC(USA)), makes similar observations. Barnes notes that when PC(USA) leaders invoke the call to racial justice and multiculturalism, they base their appeals not on Reformed theological grounding but on an "Enlightenment" rationale that is common with the broader society. "When it comes to multiculturalism, much of the conversation, rhetoric, rationale and impetus comes out of our Enlightenment Mother," states Barnes. He notes that even within the church, our arguments are often based on "equal rights" and "rationally based" commitments that are not theological but rather secular, rational and philosophically ideological. Barnes goes on to lament:

> I think we've lost sight of our heritage on this issue. Because Presbyterians have all been trained in Enlightenment-based colleges and universities and maybe even seminaries…we don't want to sound ignorant. We don't want to just say, 'God told me I have to do this.' The reality is that *is* what we think. Our faith is dogmatic. It's not Aristotelian. Even the Catholics have a more rational basis for what they think that we

[83] Mouw.

> [Reformed] do. Ours is faith seeking understanding. That is classic Reformed thinking for us. We can't even understand the world around us without looking through the spectacles of Scripture.[84]

Mouw and Barnes both affirm that despite the well-developed theological foundations for cultural inclusivity as stated in the government documents of the PC(USA), on a local level the progressive Presbyterian movement seems to be more significantly influenced by secular political notions of diversity and inclusion, agendas that are often baptized as "theology" and implement a highly selective use of Scripture. This deficiency of theological and spiritual formation is offered as at least one reason why an abiding commitment to reach and include diverse peoples has been so lacking on a local congregational level. Simply put, the movement has lacked theological and spiritual power and has failed to address the deeper sources of segregation.

Second, there may not simply be a disconnect between the progressive theology of inclusivity and the practice of the local church; there may be something faulty with the theology itself. Numerous conservative Reformed leaders suggest as much when they accuse the progressive Reformed movement of being more occupied with the concept of "diversity" than with the gospel message itself. "We have power to see diverse congregations form not because of our commitment to 'diversity,' but because of the gospel itself, which always moves people out of their ethnocentrism and gives them a love for people than transcends culture," states PCA pastor Doug Logan.[85] His concern has merit when re-viewing the PC(USA) document *Living the Vision: Becoming a Multicultural Church* with this particular theological concern in mind. The most common theological description of church that emerges within this document is "inclusive

[84] Craig Barnes. Personal interview. 9 December 2013.
[85] Logan.

community." In building a theological case for this vision, the authors state, "Jesus advocated an inclusive and diverse reign of God where people of all races, genders and cultures from east and west, north and south are welcome and appreciated."[86] Again and again churches are exhorted to create a "culture of inclusion" within congregations that open the doors widely to all.[87] The language of mission and "missional journey" is employed, as is the case in the conservative Reformed churches that often speak of mission to a secularizing culture. But whereas the latter call for a witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ, this particular document calls for a witness to *inclusiveness* itself. "Undoubtedly a congregational response to the call to multicultural mission stands as *a witness to inclusiveness within two important contexts outside the congregation*: (1) in the broader secular context of social intolerance and exclusion of persons based on how society categorizes them; (2) within our denominational context where the great majority of congregations comprise homogenous memberships."[88] Indeed, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not mentioned a single time in the entire document. The single reference to Jesus Christ relates to his moral example of welcoming those who were previously excluded from God's community. Whereas in the conservative Reformed communities the object of witness emphatically remains the person and work of Jesus Christ, it seems that *an inclusive practice and attitude* is more often stated as the object of witness within the progressive Reformed churches. While there are many commendable aspects of the PC(USA)'s grappling with cultural diversity, at least some of the fears of conservative Reformed leaders seem to have materialized: among progressive Reformed churches, "diversity" and "inclusivity" have at times become the objects of witness rather than God's grace in Jesus Christ. In too many cases,

[86] Parker and Girgis, 18.
[87] *Ibid.,* 15, 18, 24, 32, 37, 58, 67.
[88] *Ibid*., 37. Emphasis theirs.

progressive Reformed leaders mimic in their language and appeals the concerns of progressive social and political movements for equality and tolerance, confusing theology with secular social agendas.

To summarize this section on theology, Reformed theology and ecclesiology have been shaped in contexts that are generally removed from the concerns of sub-dominant cultures, which creates barriers for minorities in accessing majority culture Reformed congregations. In more recent times, the conservative and progressive American Presbyterian Reformed movements have exhibited very different approaches when it comes to multiculturalism, yet resulting in similar outcomes. Conservatives resist the possibility that the core of Reformed orthodox theology has any relevancy to issues of race, and often view multiculturalism as a threat rather than an opportunity. Progressives embrace multiculturalism and have gone to great lengths to articulate the importance of cultural diversity, yet the general practice and even some of the grounding theology of the progressive movement is more shaped by secular commitments to inclusivity rather than classic Reformed doctrine. Neither approach has successfully fostered a practical Reformed ecclesiology that can actually develop multiethnic congregations, as evidenced by the lack of diversity within American Presbyterian congregations in both conservative and progressive quarters.

Culture

The final theme that emerged in interviews which is credited for the failure of the American Reformed movement to foster diverse congregations is that of culture. Specifically, this theme refers to the propensity in Reformed congregations to confuse cultural forms of worship and practice with the theological substance of the gospel. Many minority Reformed

leaders note the inability of majority white institutions like the PCA and the PC(USA) to recognize the ways that they are "captive" to white, European cultural forms, and the way those forms work to exclude minorities. "The white captivity of the church," writes Soong-Chan Rah, "elevates the standards and norms of Western, white culture above all other races and cultures. White captivity usurps God's glorious image in all races by establishing a gradation of value among the races and establishing a system of white privilege and entitlement."[89] In most cases, these forms of captivity to white Western cultural forms are not driven by malicious intent; indeed they are rarely even recognized. It is the privilege of those in the dominant culture to consider the majority way of doing things the "norm," while all other cultural forms are assessed and measured around it. "Because denominations like the PCA are still dominated by white folks," comments Harlem pastor Jeff White, "it is a huge barrier to overcome, because people are just completely blind to subtle preconceived racist notions in their hearts and lives."[90] Another minority PCA pastor notes, "There is a lack of awareness that the systems and processes of our denomination are designed for one specific kind of people: those from white, highly educated society. The dominant culture never feels the culture."[91] Jim S. Kim, a Korean-American PC(USA) pastor, remarks that despite the ostensible commitments made to diversity in the PC(USA), there are too many "deep, subterranean assumptions made on all kinds of issues" in the mandated forms of congregational life that bring offense to minority leaders, and that ultimately white leaders "are not willing to give up their [cultural] dominance."[92] Anthony

[89] Rah, 83.
[90] White.
[91] Logan.
[92] Kim.

Bradley remarks starkly, "The Reformed and Presbyterian tradition…is culturally captive to white Western norms."[93]

One result of this "captivity" is that minority leaders in the Reformed tradition often feel they must weaken or even abandon their own cultural histories and habits in order to be fully integrated into a Reformed community. "When I first was drawn to the Reformed tradition and found a church home," comments African-American seminarian Jemar Tisby, "I felt like an insider and an outsider at the same time. I found Reformed theology so much more fulfilling, but culturally and racially I was an outsider."[94] Carl Ellis notes that historically in the African American community, a "black Presbyterian" conjured up one who had abandoned his own roots in order to assimilate into the dominant white culture. "The traditional black Presbyterian is… an image of one who is a little snobbish, pulled up, cold, not in touch with their roots, black bourgeoisie."[95] Another black PCA pastor put it succinctly, "As soon as you become Reformed you don't fit into black culture anymore."[96] The pattern noted among many minority leaders in the Reformed tradition is that in order to be fully embraced by their denominational cultures, they must become "sell-outs" to their own culture, separating from their own ethnic communities rather than receiving freedom to contextualize the Reformed faith in their own cultural clothing. "The more an ethnic person adopts white cultural norms, leaving his or her ethnic heritage behind and denigrating it, the more likely that person will be embraced as a representative of 'diversity,'" writes Anthony Bradley.[97]

---

[93] Bradley, *Aliens*., 16.
[94] Jemar Tisby. Personal interview. 13 May 2014.
[95] Ellis.
[96] Wy Plummer. Personal interview. 19 February 2014.
[97] Bradley, *Aliens*, 23.

This phenomenon of "white privilege" or "white captivity" is by no means unique to the Reformed movement, but there are aspects of Reformed theological commitments that intensify this cultural dynamic. Whereas churches and denominations in the non-denominational, charismatic and Pentecostal traditions tend to be more flexible and pragmatic when it comes to "forms" of church life, the Reformed tradition has tended to inculcate greater rigidity in forms and practices of church due to its high value on Scriptural and theological fidelity. "The Reformed emphasis on objective, absolute truth has sometimes been misused," writes Reformed theologian John Frame. "It is one thing to insist on the absolute truth of Scripture. But Reformed theologians have often insisted also on the unchangeable divine truth of various traditions of worship and church life…This traditionalism is ironically closer to Roman Catholic theology than to the Reformation *sola Scriptura*, and it forms a major barrier to communication between the Reformed churches and minority cultures."[98] In this instance a notable strength of the Reformed tradition, its strong emphasis on fidelity to the Scriptures as the superior governing principle for all of church life, ironically serves to undermine the very principle it seeks to uphold when conformity to Scripture becomes confused with fidelity to certain cultural forms and practices.

A frequently cited standard for congregational practice that exhibits this tendency in the Reformed tradition is called "the regulative principle." A distinctly Reformed principle that remains influential especially in the conservative Reformed movement, "the regulative principle of worship" states that the corporate worship of God is to be only founded on explicit and specific directives from Scripture. In its most rigid form is stipulates "that what is commanded is required; what is not commanded is forbidden."[99] The regulative principle is attributed to John

[98] Frame.
[99] R.J. Gore, Jr. "Adiaphora in Worship," *Tabletalk* (July 1, 2010).

Calvin[100] and the Westminster Confession of Faith, which states that "The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture."[101] Expressing the classic commitment of Reformed theology to exalt the Word of God as the supreme authority for life and faith, the regulative principle seeks to guard against extra biblical practices in worship and only allow those elements and forms of worship that are specifically prescribed by Scripture. The regulative principle is often cited when stipulating corporate worship on Sunday (the Lord's Day), use of the Psalter, right preaching and right administration of sacraments, and a general sense of reverence in corporate worship.[102] But in many cases right forms of worship are also expanded to include a prohibition of art, aesthetic expressions of worship, dance, drama,[103] and even theater-lighting, bands, and hand-held microphones.[104]

To many Reformed minority leaders, this preoccupation with right forms of worship is clear evidence of the propensity of the Reformed tradition to confuse culture with the central matters of the gospel. Brian Blount, African-America PC(USA) pastor and president of Union Presbyterian Seminary, questions, "Is there an idolatry of our forms that so captivate us that we can no longer separate the form from the truth?" He continues, "Sometimes we so adhere to our forms (Westminster Catechism, *Gloria Patri*, the order of the worship service, how the bulletin is structured), that the forms become the faith! If someone challenges the form, then they have

[100] "God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his Word." John Calvin, "The Neccessity of Reforming the Church," *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters,* Vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 128.
[101] Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 21, paragraph 1.
[102] "The Regulative Principle," (n.d.). [Blog Post] \http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/the-regulative-principle/ (accessed 15 October 2015).
[103] Derek Thomas, "The Regulative Principle of Worship" *Table Talk* (July 1, 2010).
[104] Terry Johnson, "Pluralistic Worship," *Table Talk* (June 1, 2008).

challenged our faith…In this world it's going to be hard to be multicultural as long as the forms are so important that we can't see how God can operate in new forms and new ways."[105] Kevin Smith, a pastor of a multicultural PCA congregation, also notes that "Reformed churches have sometimes baptized the culture, so that when they present the gospel to the black community, it cannot flex at all. Because what they consider to be biblical norms, especially in worship, are really cultural norms, and they don't see the difference."[106] Smith goes on to note that even in some of the basic Reformed traditions, such as singing straight through a multi-versed hymn, subtle communications are made that this place of worship is not for minority communities which tend to value repetition, spontaneity, and more emotive forms of musical expression. When it comes to preaching styles, responsive congregational interactivity, use of choirs, or song choices, Reformed churches tend to exhibit a general ignorance of cultural realities, argues Jemar Tisby. "People in the majority don't often realize they have a culture. What is a cultural tradition and preference to them becomes the norm, and anything outside those cultural norms are taken as an aberration. Especially in worship, cultural preferences are elevated to biblical principles. It becomes a matter of biblical fidelity when it's not."[107]

As a particular example of this tendency, recently I was asked to review a mission study of a PC(USA) downtown congregation in Richmond, Virginia, that was beginning a pastoral search process. The mission study group wrote an excellent mission study, one that was clearly influenced by the best of missional theology. They wrote descriptively of their changing urban neighborhood, of the many diverse cultures present, of the many unchurched and never-churched people surrounding their parish. They wrote of their passion to be a missional, hospitable

[105] Blount.
[106] Kevin Smith. Personal interview. 2 April 2013.
[107] Tisby.

congregation that reaches out and welcomes their neighbors. They spoke boldly of their willingness to change and adapt for the sake of mission and do whatever it takes to become a more culturally diverse congregation. Yet after all this, they included this brief but significant statement: "To fulfill our mission, the Session and the congregation need to embrace fundamental change – *not in our theology or style of worship*, but in our understanding of what God's call requires of us."[108] The statement represents an inability or unwillingness to see the dichotomy between the expressed vision and the actual theology and worship practices of the church. There is embedded within this statement the idea that the theology and worship of the church are invariable and even a-cultural, even while there is an admission that mission requires change.

In sum, one of the hallmarks of the Reformed tradition is its unwavering subscription to Scripture as the final and unchanging authority for the forms and practices of congregational life. Yet when this Scriptural authority is confused with specific Western-European elements and traditions of congregational practice, the Reformed tradition becomes particularly intractable in its unwillingness to adapt new cultural forms that express the traditions and longings of sub-dominant minority people groups. This remains an enduring challenge for Reformed congregations across the theological spectrum because it is so often undetectable to those within the majority culture. As long as Reformed congregations are unwilling to grow in cultural intelligence and examine the way that certain forms of congregational life are more shaped by cultural preference than timeless truth, there will be little to no progress in fostering more diverse congregations.

[108] Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church Mission Study Report, Richmond, VA, p.10, emphasis mine.

Conclusion

In the project to construct a fresh Reformed ecclesiology that can help to foster multicultural congregations, we have sought to assess the current challenges facing American Reformed congregations as they contend with a new diverse reality. Using the denominations of the PC(USA) and the PCA as case studies, and by interviewing leaders and pastors within them, we have seen the complexity of the failures and struggles of the Reformed movement in fostering diverse congregations and reaching non-white people groups. These struggles are rooted in the missteps and narratives of the past, are integrated into the patterns and practices of the present, and are formative for the future of Reformed congregations. By examining the struggles through the categories of history, theology and culture, we can identify specific ecclesiological deficiencies that may serve as a guide for constructing a fresh Reformed ecclesiology that can foster multicultural congregations for the sake of faithful witness.

In the words of Timothy Keller, "cultural diversity is crucial for missional credibility…It has never been more crucial."[109] It is the intent of this project to demonstrate that the Reformed tradition has rich resources to foster such congregations. But to do so we will need a fresh ecclesiology that can not only deal with the missteps and current unhappy realities of the Reformed tradition when it comes to multiculturalism, but also chart a new way forward. How can such a fresh Reformed ecclesiology be constructed, one that can foster congregations that are able to engage authentically with their multicultural contexts for the sake of witness? It is that question we turn to next.

[109] Keller, Personal Interview.

CHAPTER 2, A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONSTRUCTING A PRACTICAL, MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

One of the challenges of ecclesiology is that its subject, the church, inhabits such complex and divergent planes. There is the church of the Scriptures, which includes lofty images like "the body of Christ," "the new community," or "the bride of Christ." There is the church of systematic theology, described and categorized in multiple ways in multiple theological traditions. There is the church of history, in all its failings and triumphs, in all its multitudinous forms. There is the church that is a contemporary socio-cultural entity, full of real people in real cultures in the real world. This makes any study of the church a complicated enterprise that involves a nuanced study of Bible, theology, history, and sociology at the very least.

Traditionally, ecclesiology has not accounted for the complex intersection of these planes, and has mostly remained fixed in the first two, that of Bible and systematic theology. In the words of Paul Fiddes, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Oxford, "Ecclesiology, as employed by theologians, is deeply rooted in a doctrine of the triune God, and so seems to take its sources 'deductively' from the Holy Scriptures, the tradition of the church, and its liturgy…Conclusions are drawn quite tightly and inevitably from accepted premises, in this case the beliefs held by the Christian community."[110] This deductive approach typically resembles exploring macro theological principles about the church and then (sometimes) applying them to particular situations. This approach certainly has an important place in the discipline of ecclesiology and must not be abandoned, yet there are important reasons why this deductive method alone is insufficient.

[110] Paul Fiddes, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?" in *Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 13.

First, a purely deductive approach to ecclesiology does not have an adequate account of culture and our culturally framed modes of knowledge. In our late-modern age, there is an increasing awareness of the historically conditioned nature of all human knowledge, and a corresponding suspicion toward any claim to knowledge that does account for its formation within a particular cultural tradition. Indeed, the whole practice of systematic theology itself was forged within Western European thought forms. But as the Christian community has spread throughout the globe and as indigenous churches and leaders around the world have sought to articulate their beliefs in their own cultural milieus, perhaps even with a self-conscious resistance to Western forms of thought, our awareness of the culturally determined ways of doing theology has deepened. If "contextualization" is taken to mean taking classic theological doctrines and "clothing" them with new cultural forms, that definition is not sufficient. It is necessary to examine how *even the doctrines themselves* are culturally "clothed" and reflect the culture of origin. Culture must be taken seriously in doing theology, recognizing that culture is not a universal phenomenon but is constituted by a changing collection of habits, practices and ways of knowing. A purely deductive approach that works only on the plane of theological models will be unable to recognize how the models themselves may be limited, exclusionary, or even obfuscating to the gospel.

Second, a purely deductive approach to ecclesiology does not have a sufficient accounting for the historical and sociological reality of the church. The systematic practice of ecclesiology often considers "the church" as having a universal, invariant nature, without consideration of its variegated historical and cultural expressions.[111] Each tradition tends to have its own version of an ahistorical ecclesiological "essence." Whether it be "Church as an Icon of the Trinity" in

[111] Examples of this abound and will be explored below.

Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology, the "Church as Covenant" in Reformed theology, or the "Church as the People of God" in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, these "essences" are postulated as ahistorical categories that are meant to define the true nature of the church at all times and in all places.[112] The problem with this is that the church has not been the same in all times and in all places, not even within the same theological tradition. In focusing only on the defined "essence" of the church, other vital factors in considering the church are ignored, such as the many other ways the church's essence is defined outside of the particular tradition in question, or the many ways the church has been culturally variegated even within one single tradition, or the many ways the church is affected by cultural influences of the age it inhabits, just to name a few. Ecclesiology in some ways is quite different from other subjects of classic systematic theology because the subject of reflection is a time-limited, historically situated, culturally habited community of flawed human beings. Ecclesiological reflection that focuses only on the theological essence of the church without taking account of its socio-historical reality is indeed limited in its scope and is not true to the nature of its subject.

Third, a purely deductive approach to ecclesiology is even insufficient *theologically* as demonstrated by reasons intrinsic to Christian theology itself. Perhaps the most significant theological reason is that the veracity of our Christian faith is grounded in the doctrine of revelation, the self-revealing or self-unveiling of God. God's acts of self-revelation certainly include the revealing of laws and the communication of truths that endure through time and cultures. But significantly, God reveals Godself in the Christian narrative within particular times, places, and cultures, often embodying the time-limited textures of the people with whom God engages. Obviously the most compelling example of this is the Incarnation of God in the person

[112] See the "frames" as noted by Veli-Matti Karkkainen in *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

of Jesus Christ. The supreme revelation of God is not carried out some universal, general sort of way that is spiritually mediated to each individual, but is rather literally embodied in a physical form in all the particularities of first century Palestine. God reveals Godself in history, and God continues to engage in real history with real people in real cultures through the acts of God's Spirit. In the words of Paul Fiddes, "taking incarnation seriously means more than applying existing principles. This leads to a kind of 'sacramental' understanding of reality in which God is encountered in an embodied way, through concrete realities, and not merely through ideas. The ordinary things of life can become transparent to God's presence; culture itself can be sacramental, in the sense of providing places of transforming encounter with the triune God."[113] So the Christian doctrine of revelation ironically demands that we attend to more than just revelation as it has been historically understood. A purely deductive approach to ecclesiology that simply seeks to apply the truths of God to a situation is in danger of missing what a particular situation may speak about the truths of God. Truth is not just a matter of propositions but is also bound up in the lives of concrete communities that seek to bear witness to God's truth in history.

In sum, a purely deductive approach to ecclesiology is insufficient on a number of different levels: epistemologically, sociologically, and theologically, to name just three as enumerated above. This fact requires that we develop a methodological approach for ecclesiology that takes seriously the multiple intersections and divergent planes that are at play in the study of the church, one that can engage robustly in both deductive and inductive forms of knowledge. I'd like to move toward my own proposal for a methodology to frame this particular study of

[113] Fiddes, 19.

ecclesiology, but first it will be important to recognize the ways others have sought to negotiate this tension within the study of the church.

Don S. Browning and Descriptive Ecclesiology

Don Browing was Professor of Religion and Psychological Studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School for nearly 40 years. He was one the architects of the modern discipline of practical theology, and his book *A Fundamental Practical Theology* is considered a classic in the field. Browning's objective in this book is to demonstrate that "Christian theology should be seen as practical through and through and at its very heart."[114] Throughout the book Browning consistently takes aim at the deductive approach to the study of the church as discussed above, which applies macro theological theories to the concrete situation of the church. Browning is committed to undermine this bifurcation between theory and practice and to offer a unique approach to the study of the church that binds theory and practice together from the start.

Browning repudiates the traditional model of systematic and practical theology that views practice as the application of theory. He insists throughout his work that this is a false division, because "all our practices, even our religious practices, have theories behind and within them."[115] Every action, behavior and habit within a community of faith is laden with religious ideas, theories, beliefs and commitments. The task of the student of a congregation is not simply to study the habits and behaviors of the congregation in order to promote new ones (a sociological approach), nor to apply new theories to the congregation in order to encourage new behaviors (a traditional practical-theological approach), but rather to uncover the existing theories within the practices of the congregation and to initiate a process of discovery, deconstruction and

[114] Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 7.
[115] *Ibid*., 6.

reconstitution. In Browning's words, the process of the congregation moves "from present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of a more critically held theory-laden practices."[116]

This is one of the key ways that Browning distinguishes his approach of practical theology from the classic approach of systematic theology. Whereas the traditional approach of systematics relates theology to general features of situations, "a fundamental practical theology starts with full descriptions of concrete situations and relates more general features of situations to the richness of the concrete."[117] What constitutes the kind of "full description" of concrete situations of which Browning speaks? Browning uses the term "descriptive theology" to discuss the process of arriving at a thick theological description of community practices. Every action, he writes, is "1) made up of concrete practices (rules, roles, communication patterns); 2) motivated by needs and tendencies; 3) limited and channeled by social-systemic and ecological constraints; 4) further ordered by principles of obligation; and 5) given meaning by visions, narratives, and metaphors."[118] Each of these various levels of meaning behind social practices of a given community require different disciplines of study, ranging from psychology to sociology to anthropology to theology. Browning gives special attention to the Obligational (#4) and Visional (#5) dimensions, which together he describes as "the system of narrative, signs, symbols and rules that gives meaning and significance to the actions and practices of groups."[119] The purpose of this is not only to offer a critical theological evaluation of the "theory-laden practices" of a faith community, but also to maintain the close relationship between theological description and the other elements of ethnographic evaluation of the group in question.

---

[116] *Ibid*., 7.
[117] *Ibid*., 140.
[118] *Ibid*., 111.
[119] *Ibid*., 121

Once a thick description is attained, Browning sees the process as one of ongoing discovery and interaction between theory and practice. Browning suggests that transformation can begin in a congregation when a change or crisis occurs that challenges the principles, narratives or commitments that are embedded within its current practices. In this case "the community must re-examine the sacred texts and events that constitute the source of the norms and ideals that guide its practices. It brings its questions to these normative texts and has conversation between its questions and these texts."[120] In this way the congregational collective becomes a "community of interpreters" which is engaged in a process of re-discovery, in which it comes to terms with its new environment, recognizes the inadequacy of its current practices, discovers the narratives behind those practices, or potentially re-discovers new meanings to those narratives and adopts new corresponding habits. Browning draws the analogy here between this process and modern hermeneutical theory, especially that of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer and his colleagues rejected the possibility of pure objectivity in approaching a text, asserting instead that the process of understanding is more like a dialogue in which our pre-commitments and biases are actually incorporated as tools of engagement for the understanding process. Gadamer, like Browning, insisted that understanding (theory) and interpretation (application) are not distinct but intimately related. So Browning applies Gadamer's methods to his own construction of practical theology: "Application to practice is not an act that follows understanding. It guides the interpretive process from the beginning… it implies more nearly a radical practice-theory-practice model of understanding that gives the entire theological enterprise a thoroughly practical cast."[121]

Browning's model is helpful for our purposes of discerning a way to hold together both inductive and deductive approaches to ecclesiology. He suggests a unique interdisciplinary

[120] *Ibid*., 6.
[121] *Ibid*., 39.

approach in the study of congregations that integrates the social sciences into the practice of theological analysis, without affording those sciences the claim of objectivity. He offers a useful model for robustly describing the practices of congregations. He shatters the myth that theology in any terms can be less than practical, asserting that questions of practice and application are present in theology from the beginning. Finally, Browning helps us see the importance of recognizing the congregation as a living library of theological content whose practices express the theology laden within it.

A question remains about whether Browning gives adequate attention to God as a participating agent in the practical theological process. His criticism of systematic theologians from Barth to Tillich is revealing of his bias. Of Karl Barth he writes, "Barth saw theology as the systematic interpretation of God's self-disclosure to the Christian church. There was no role for human understanding, action, or practice in the construal of God's self-disclosure. In this view, theology is practical only by applying God's revelation as directly and purely as possible to the concrete situation."[122] While it certainly may be true that Barth prioritizes the action of God over and above human involvement or interpretation, such comments reveal Browning's hesitancy to see God as an engaged actor who participates along with the human agents in the process of discovery and reconstitution. John Webster more accurately interprets Barth's ecclesiological reflections with the phrase, "God and humanity as agents in relation."[123] Browning stops short of acknowledging God as an active agent in the discovery and re-discovery process within the church, and as a result his methodology is unduly weighted toward inductive analysis. Browning clearly privileges ethnographic and sociological descriptions of the church over theological ones, thus surrendering a theological account of the church to a sociological

[122] Ibid., 5.
[123] John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 33.

account that is far from neutral. It will take other theologians to come to a more balanced approach in using ethnography and inductive analysis in a strongly theological framework.

Roger Haight and Ecclesiology from Below

Roger Haight is a Roman Catholic theologian who is former professor of systematic theology at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology. He is most well known for his book *Jesus Symbol of God* (1999), in which Haight suggests that while classic Christology has been carried out "from above," taking its cues from macro philosophical themes regarding the divinity of Christ, a more faithful practice in our contemporary context is to do Christology "from below," taking the humanity of Jesus Christ much more seriously than traditionally has been done in systematic theology. Haight's book became the epicenter of great controversy within the Roman Catholic Church, and resulted in Haight's expulsion from his teaching post and the Vatican's official forbiddance of his writing or instructing on theology.[124]

As articulated in his 1990 book *Dynamics of Theology*, Haight's concern is to critically examine the bases upon which traditional theological work builds, the nature of theology's sources, and the methods by which it is carried out. While *Dynamics of Theology* outlines his methodology, *Jesus Symbol of God* seeks to put that methodology into practice through the lens of Christology. Finally, in 2004 Haight sought to complete this project through a 3-volume work on ecclesiology, *Christian Community in History*. It is that later project to which we now turn.

Haight, like Browning, is concerned to address an overly deductive approach to ecclesiology, which he calls "Ecclesiology from Above." He notes several characteristics of this approach: First, it approaches the church as if it possesses an "invariant essence" which transcends the

[124] David Gibson, "The Vatican Levies Further Penalties on Roger Haight, SJ," www.commonweal.org, (January 2, 2009), accessed 19 September 2012.

church's particular historical instantiations. Second, it construes the whole church in terms of one's own theological tradition (whoever happens to be doing the theology!). Third, it views the church as unaffected by the surrounding cultural contexts. Fourth, it understands the church's origin and development in strictly doctrinal terms. Fifth, it is Christocentric in its confession. Sixth, it is hierarchal in its approach to new structures and ministry possibilities.[125] According to Haight, these characteristics conspire to form a highly abstract portrait of the church that is theologically reductionistic and invariably un-human.

In contrast to this "from Above" theological approach, Haight's ambition is to present an "Ecclesiology from Below" that takes the human historical reality of the church far more seriously. Haight argues that our heightened historical consciousness, the impact of globalization and pluralism, and the rampant secularism both within and without the church all require that our theological methods begin with making explicit the church's historical context both past and present. The church simply cannot be imagined as having some pristine theological essence that transcends the realities of time, culture and history, and there must be an expectation for continuity between the historical existence of the church and of the human communities around it. Haight writes, "The first movement of an inquiry that strives for an adequate understanding of the church should not be governed by a private language taken exclusively from theological sources. The church is a historical community."[126] Haight argues that the church is simultaneously a historical and theological reality, relating at the same time to both God and the world. He calls for a theological method that takes account for both these aspects of the church and works to integrate them. Such a method will involve historical, sociological, theological and

[125] Roger Haight, SJ, *Christian Community in History*, Vol. 1 (New York: Continuum, 2004). For Haight's full description see pages 18-25.
[126] Ibid., 37.

hermeneutical methods, working together to examine not just theology but also history, sociology, confessions, and experience. Haight is convinced that an ecclesiology that does not have any reference to these historical and experiential elements of the church's manifestations cannot actually be termed true ecclesiology. He writes, "Ecclesiology from below means that theological statements about the church that do not in some way refer to the concrete, historical church fail in characterizing the object of its discipline; and statements about that church which do not illumine the historical institution with the light of God's presence and activity relative to it are in that measure not theological and thus not ecclesiological."[127]

This statement is significant not only for its boldness but also for its acknowledgment of God's activity in the church's process of historical development. With this assertion Haight makes explicit what Browning never really acknowledges, that "the church is the community of God as Spirit unleashed into world history in the name of Jesus."[128] Haight emphasizes the person of the Spirit over the person of the Son in his Ecclesiology from Below, for the language of the Spirit suggests more the work of God *within* the community rather than outside or beyond it. Affirming the work of the Spirit in the socio-historical expressions of the Church gives Haight the tools he needs to address the church as a Theological-Historical reality, wherein the Spirit of God works in and through the human community even as that community is affected by the changing dynamics of its historical and sociological conditions.

For our purposes, Haight advances the thesis forward that ecclesiology must be carried out in a way that gives serious attention to the historical sociological reality of the human community that is the church. When facing the contemporary cultural pluralism in which the American church finds itself, Haight clarifies that it is not enough to ask, "How do we apply our theology

[127] *Ibid*., 6.
[128] Ibid., 52.

of the church to this new context?", but also to recognize the ways that the historical context will inevitably shape how we do our theology in the first place. Unlike Browning, Haight makes explicit space for the activity of God as an agent in the historical process of the church's development, recognizing how the Spirit works through historical conditions and sociological patterns to constitute the church. But Haight's concern to counter-act "Ecclesiology from Above" may go too far in his hesitancy to affirm the capacity and willingness of God to disclose any trans-cultural vision for the church's life and witness. Haight is so committed to keep ecclesiological reflection at the level of socio-historical communities that he cannot imagine that the Spirit is doing anything more in these human communities than embodying new forms of ecclesial life that reflect its host culture. Yet the Apostle John quotes Jesus as saying, "The Spirit bears witness about me."[129] Could the Spirit be at work in historical communities not just to create new expressions of congregational life but actually to point to a divine reality outside and beyond that community, one that is not contingent or dependent on that community's context? We turn to Nicholas Healy to address that question.

Nicholas M. Healy and Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology

Nicholas M. Healy is Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at St John's University, New York, and author of the book *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*.[130] Healey is part of a company of scholars who have recently initiated a collaborative project and book series entitled "Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography." The series focuses on developing new forms of cross-disciplinary scholarship in the study of the

[129] John 15:26 (ESV).
[130] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

church. In the words of the series editors, "The series has grown out of a convergence around the attempt to rethink the customary divide between empirical and theological analyses of the Church within Religious Studies, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology."[131] Healey is a contributor to the initial volume of the series, and his book *Church, World and the Christian Life* is commonly cited among the other contributing authors because of its prescient, clear descriptions of the tensions under consideration.

In his book, Healy addresses some of the same concerns about the modern discipline of ecclesiology that Browning and Haight do. Healy is especially critical of what he calls "modern ecclesiology," or ecclesiology within the last 100 years, which emphasizes systematization of thought and is abstracted from the concrete life of the living church. Modern ecclesiology "focused more on discerning the right things to think about the church rather than orientated to the living, rather messy, confused and confusing body that the church actually is. It displays a preference for describing the church's theoretical and essential identity rather than its concrete and historical identity."[132] Healy helpfully characterizes such forms of ecclesiology as "blueprint ecclesiologies," which he describes as the attempt to encapsulate in a single word or phrase the most essential characteristics of the church.[133] Such methodology tends to form normative systematic and theoretical forms of the church that are often not reflective of its concrete practices in everyday life, thus representing an idealized account of the church rather than one that embodies its true identity.[134] Although Healy acknowledges the occasional usefulness of such models especially in academic theology, he concludes that this ecclesiological approach is

[131] Ward, iii.
[132] Healy, 3.
[133] *Ibid*., 26.
[134] Healy cites Avery Dulles' book *Models of the Church* as an example of this, although Dulles does warn against attempting to identify a "supermodel" of the church to relativize all others.

not ultimately useful to the church because it lacks robust consideration and analysis of the church's present practices and institutions. According to Healy, the impression that this heavily deductive approach offers is "that theologians believe that it is necessary to get our *thinking* about the church right first, after which we can go on to put our theory into practice. It is as if good ecclesial practices can be described only after a prior and quite abstract consideration of true ecclesiological doctrine."[135] This approach then opens up a great fissure between theory and practice, between what is considered the ideal ecclesiology and what are the actual practical realities of the concrete church.

Much like Browning and Haight, Healy invites students of the church to undertake serious consideration of the historical, contextual, sociological realities of the living church and to use all disciplines necessary in order to engage in such study. "[The church's] life takes concrete form in the web of social practices accepted and promoted by the community as well as in the activities of its individual members."[136] Like Haight, Healy affirms the dual identity of the church, reflecting both the divine and human agency at work in its formation. "That identity is thoroughly theological, for it is constituted by the activity of the Holy Spirit…But it is also constituted by the activity of its members as they live out their lives of discipleship."[137] Healy warns against theological reductionism on the one hand that reduces the church's identity to theological abstractions, but on the other hand he also warns against non-theological reductionism that views the church as nothing more than a collection of human practices and institutions. Ecclesiology, according to Healy, "need[s] to find ways to make theological use of

[135] *Ibid*., 36. Emphasis his.
[136] *Ibid*., 5.
[137] *Ibid*.

those forms of discourses that critically examine the complexities and confusions of human activity, such as sociology, cultural analysis, and history."[138]

Up to this point Healy appears to make similar arguments to those of Browning and Haight. However there is one highly significant development in Healy's work that sets him apart. That is his affirmation of the church as a *concrete, apostolic agent*. "If we begin with what the church does," Healy writes, "one of the things we must say about is that it has been entrusted with the apostolic task. The church's responsibility is to witness to its Lord, to make known throughout the world the Good News of salvation in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ."[139] With this calling in view, Healy argues that it is the task of ecclesiology not to formulate theoretical images for the church, but is "to reconstruct its concrete identity so as to embody its witness."[140] The church of every age finds itself in ever shifting contexts that deeply challenge its members to bear truthful witness to its entrusted message. Unlike so many forms of ecclesiology that pay little attention to the church's context and focus on describing its theological essence, Healy insists that the main purpose of ecclesiology is to equip the church to understand and respond to its context, both how it has been corrupted and infected by it, in order to discern how it is called to bear witness faithfully within it as apostolic agent. "We can assess any ecclesiological proposal by how well it helps the church respond to its context,"[141] Healy writes.

On this basis Healy claims that ecclesiology is not mainly speculative and systematic, but rather practical and prophetic. It is *practical* because its theological reflection from the very

[138] *Ibid.*
[139] *Ibid.*, 6. Healy describes the second task of the church as shaping its members toward "truthful discipleship," but he spends more time reflecting on the apostolic task.
[140] *Ibid.*, 22.
[141] *Ibid.*

outset is oriented around the church's concrete apostolic task, and it is *prophetic* because it reflects theologically and critically upon the church's practices in order to call it to greater faithfulness in witness. "Ecclesiologists have something rather like a prophetic function in the church…they attempt to assess the church's witness and pastoral care in light of Scripture and in relation to a theological analysis of the contemporary ecclesiological context. They propose changes in the church's concrete identity that will conserve, reform or more radically restructure it, in order to help it embody its witness more truthfully….Contextual ecclesial praxis informs ecclesiology, and ecclesiology informs contextual ecclesial praxis, in a practical hermeneutical circle."[142] Thus similar to Browning, the church's life should be embodied in a process of deconstruction and reconstitution as it responds to its new contexts. But unlike Browning, Healy sees this process not simply as a reaction to new sociological and historical realities, but as a necessary response to the apostolic calling of the church to bear witness to the trans-cultural reality of the gospel. "Ecclesial cultural identity is constructed as a struggle, not to preserve some essential identity, but to construct and reconstruct that identity in light of an orientation to what it alone seeks, the truth revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That identity is constructed by experimentation, by bricolage and by retrieval of earlier forms. Conflict, error and sin are inherent aspects of the concrete church, and so self-criticism is a necessary element in its further construction." Like Browning, Healy speaks of the deconstructive and reconstructive nature of the ecclesiological process, but for Healy this process is catalyzed by the church's orientation toward the ever-changing context of the church's *mission* rather than simply socio-cultural trends.

[142] *Ibid*., 46.

Healy, like Browning and Haight, demonstrates the futility of approaching ecclesiology from a purely deductive perspective and not giving adequate attention to the historical and sociological realities of the church. He calls for fresh attentiveness to the context of the church, using a multidisciplinary approach to understand the ways the cultural environment has shaped the church itself and its practices. But his emphasis on the apostolic task of the church is a distinctive that sets his methodology apart, because it grounds the human, adaptive, contextual nature of the church's life and practices in a normative *telos* that transcends sociocultural realities. It orients the ecclesial adaptive process toward One who stands outside and beyond the sociocultural realities of the church, and under whom the church can be assessed and judged. This apostolic calling provides a helpful framework for my own methodology for constructing a unique ecclesiology that equips churches seeking to bear faithful witness in multicultural contexts.

Apostolicity and Ecclesiology

Since the publication in 1998 of the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America,*[143] the term "missional church" has become a locus for a growing conversation regarding the identity and purpose of the church in North America.[144] At the heart of this conversation is the shared conviction that mission is not just one dimension of the church's activities but is rather at the very heart of the church's nature. "To be missional is a matter of the *character* of the church, what the church is, whose the church is…Participation in

[143] Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
[144] For good summary of the genesis of the term and meaning of the term "missional church," see Alan J. Roxburgh, "The Missional Church," *Theology Matters* 10 (Sept/Oct 2004): 1-5.

God's mission in the world [should] permeate the whole life of the congregation."[145] Though the term "missional" has become an over-used and often misunderstood descriptor, the superlative accomplishment of the missional church movement has been to recover the concept of apostolicity, or "sent-ness," as the heart of the church's identity.

It is worth noting that the concept of apostolicity is a contested subject. In his book *Apostolicity*, John G. Flett argues that classic conceptions of apostolicity, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, are misguided and do not equip the contemporary church for faithful mission. Traditional definitions of apostolicity, "defined as faithfulness to origins expressed in the continuity of mission, often prioritize historical continuity and its associated institutional means," writes Flett.[146] When conceived in this way, the church invariably confuses the particular cultural forms of the established church with fidelity to the transcultural message. When apostolicity thus emphasizes the "cultivation of the faith" over the "communication of the faith," "culturally located forms of Christian expression [are] presented as normative and necessary to the gospel."[147] Mission then becomes a process of enculturating new people into the church's culture, perpetuating the lamentable practice of colonization.[148] Instead, Flett argues that apostolicity describes not the *substance* which is carried forward, but the *process* of witness that occurs, in which the church is seen "as a visible society in the event of cross-cultural transmission."[149] Taking his cues from the missional church discussion engendered by Newbigin, Guder and others,[150] Flett reconceives apostolicity as a process of sent-ness, in which a church

[145] Lois Barrett, "Embodying and Proclaiming the Gospel," in *Treasures in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, Lois Barrett et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 151.
[146] John Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL, 2016), 16.
[147] *Ibid.,* 24.
[148] *Ibid.,* 103-4, 137.
[149] *Ibid,* 53.
[150] The early proponents of the missional theology movement were very clear that by "apostolic" they do not merely mean "the church descended from the apostles," but use the term to describe the inherent "sentness" of the church.

seeks to embody and bear witness to the gospel in new, culturally appropriated forms. Much like Healey, Flett's aim is to recast the concept of apostolicity as a post-colonial way forward for the ecclesiological project.

Healey's and Flett's creative work on apostolicity provides a framework for an ecclesiological methodology that holds together both the inductive and deductive approaches to the study of the church. On the one hand, apostolicity implies that there is something translocal beyond and outside the church community that is the object of the community's witness. Lesslie Newbigin, missiologist and theological patriarch of the missional church movement, described the imperative of the church to claim the reality of "public truth" for its witness. "The Church cannot accept as its role simply the winning of individuals to a kind of Christian discipleship which concerns only the private and domestic aspects of life. To be faithful to a message which concerns the Kingdom of God, his rule over all things and all peoples, the Church has to claim the high ground of public truth."[151] By this Newbigin means the church is not simply a local expression of religious life, but in its most faithful forms it expresses the comprehensive and universal narrative of the reign of God over all things as demonstrated in and through the person of Jesus Christ. There is something truly "catholic" about the church's witness that naturally issues forth in theological reflection and practices that can be normative for a church's life, and that reflect a reality beyond its own limited human traditions. According to Newbigin, this calibrating catholicity is not a theological idea but is rather a *fact of history*, a revelatory event in time and space that is recorded in the biblical narrative. "The Christian tradition of rationality takes as its starting point not any alleged self-evident truths. Its starting point is events in which

"[By apostolic] We mean 'apostolicity' in the active sense of the New Testament verb, meaning 'to be sent out,' and the noun 'apostle' as the 'sent-out one.'" Darrell Guder, "The Nicene Marks in a Post-Christendom Church," *Reforming Ministry Paper*, 9.

[151] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (London: SPCK, 1997), 222.

God made himself known to men and women in particular circumstances [in history]."[152] Furthermore, taking both Haight's and Healy's affirmation of the Spirit's active presence as agent in the process of the church's development, we must affirm that the Spirit also shapes the human community of the church toward and around this supralocal reality of God's historical act of revelation in Christ. Therefore we can say that even in the particularities of a theological tradition, there is something catholic within that tradition to which it has sought to bear witness. Ecclesiology will be incomplete if it does not account for the reality that even within the unique characteristic of a local church there is a translocal reality to which the church has sought to faithfully point and by which it is formed even in its discrete rational tradition. Ecclesiology cannot be *only* an inductive, ethnographic study of the practices of the church — it must look beyond the practices to that which the practices bear witness.

On the other hand, apostolicity stresses the highly contextual and adaptive nature of the church's witness. If the church is sent, then it is continuously being called to bear witness to the events of Christ in ever new and changing situations. And this is not simply the task of articulating theological truths; it is the task, as Newbigin puts it, of the church community living as a "hermeneutic of the gospel." Newbigin writes, "How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."[153] Therefore the concrete life of the community of the church is not inconsequential to the church's beliefs; its empirical, measurable life is actually embodying, or at least called to embody, that to which it bears witness. As John Swinton puts it, "The job of the church is to

[152] Newbigin, 63.
[153] *Ibid*., 227.

show to the world what it would look like if Christianity was in fact true."[154] The local church is tasked to make intelligible the reality of the gospel in each new context in which it finds itself, discovering and experimenting with what forms of embodied life will best express the publicly truthful reality of God's reign in Christ. This task of witness is not just a task of proclamation, but the congregation itself is to embody the public narrative of the gospel in its practices and communal life. This necessitates ecclesiological thinking that takes seriously and even prioritizes the empirical life of the local congregation. Ecclesiology cannot be only inductive, but neither can it be only, nor even dominated by, deductive forms of idealized, disassociated ecclesiologies. Indeed, if the core apostolic identity of the church is to be taken seriously, the authenticity of any ecclesiological theological proposal must be assessed not just in conformity to Scripture and the traditions of its interpretation, but also with regard to its fittingness for witness in a particular ecclesiological context.[155]

This tension of apostolicity as a grid for ecclesiology is captured well in the oft used metaphor of theater. Newbigin gestures toward this metaphor in his description of the local church as a "hermeneutic of the gospel." Newbigin often stresses that the calling of the local congregation is to rehearse, or dramatize, the reality of the Christian narrative in order to demonstrate its compelling and truthful quality to the world around it. "A Christian congregation is a community…which remember[s] and rehears[es] the true story of human nature and destiny."[156] The local church will both challenge the reigning worldview around it and also demonstrate the veracity of its own narrative, not mainly through postulations but "through the witness of a community which, in unbroken continuity with the biblical actors and witness,

[154] John Swinton, "Where is Your Church? Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography," in Ward, 72.
[155] See Healey, 52 and Flett, 53.
[156] Newbigin, 229.

indwells the story the Bible tells."[157] Newbigin envisions the local congregation as theater of activity that dramatizes the biblical narrative for public viewing. Nicholas Healey makes this theatric metaphor even more explicit. Healey writes, "The prophetic and practical function of a theodramatic ecclesiological ethnography is…to open up our constructed identity to ongoing reassessment."[158] Healy uses the term "theodramatic" to describe the *improvisational* nature of this apostolic task, bearing witness to Jesus Christ in each new "scene" of the theodrama as it arises. "Ecclesial life takes the form of a grand, never-ending experiment."[159] In the "blueprint ecclesiology" approach, change or experimentation in the church's patterns and practices can be perceived as a distortion of the church's true essence, a pollution of its pure form. But in such cases the church's assessment of its faithfulness is oriented around its own closed theological templates, rather than oriented around the living Lord who calls the church to bear witness in ever changing contexts. The doctrine and study of the church, unlike the doctrine of God or other classic systematic themes, simply has different measures for assessing its faithfulness. Ecclesiology that takes seriously the apostolic identity of the church within its shifting contexts cannot be judged by systematic coherence and universality of application, but rather "how well it fosters the church's truthful witness and its members' discipleship within this particular context, as well as its practical-prophetic force and application within a particular scene of the theodrama."[160] Thus the metaphor of improvisational drama, representing the theme of Apostolicity, holds together well the tension of inductive and deductive forms of ecclesiological reflection. Apostolic ecclesiology must first take heed of the improvisational nature of the church's local expressions, attending to the ways a particular community has sought to perform

[157] *Ibid*., 97. Emphasis mine.
[158] *Ibid*., 175.
[159] *Ibid*., 75.
[160] *Ibid., 76.*

the narrative of the gospel in an intelligible way for public viewing. But it does so with the "script" in view, the biblical narrative and those traditions of interpretation and systematization that, when done faithfully, express something of the trans-local event of God's revelation in Christ that grounds, directs and chastens the drama. The theatric metaphor is a helpful image that holds both the inductive and deductive forms of ecclesiological reflection in healthy tension.

Apostolicity and Multiculturalism

Returning to our theme for this project, how does this extended reflection on ecclesiological methodology help frame an approach toward a missionary ecclesiology for churches seeking to bear witness to Christ in multicultural contexts? It is my conviction for this project that any constructive ecclesiology must at is core be apostolic. This commitment to apostolic (missional) ecclesiology will direct my own methodology of research.

First, apostolic ecclesiology requires that in constructing an ecclesiology we begin with the local congregation and its context for mission. In saying this we are rejecting two alternatives. First, we are rejecting beginning with a blueprint ecclesiology as formed in a particular theological tradition and working to explore possibilities within it for multicultural applications. To do so would be to take for granted an "essence" of the church and would explicitly or implicitly use that theological template to determine a community's faithfulness to a task that may not necessarily be apostolic. Second, we are rejecting "multiethnicity" or "multiculturality" itself as an ecclesiological blueprint. Like any blueprint ecclesiology, "multiethnicity" easily becomes a disassociated idealized vision of the church. "Multi-ethnicity" as a descriptor of church is a theoretical construct based on innumerable local experiences, and in the end proves unhelpful for actual local communities. So in rejecting these two alternatives, our approach will

be to begin with ethnographic analysis of concrete local congregations that are in the process of "improvisation," deliberately responding to contexts of cultural pluralism for the sake of mission. The purpose of this ethnography is not to gather objective data to inform the theological task, for the data itself expresses a theological process. As Browning affirmed, every local congregation is a library of theological content whose practices express the theology laden within it.

Second, apostolic ecclesiology requires that we attend to the "scripts," the broader trans-cultural narratives that inform the improvisational actions of these congregations. No congregation begins such an apostolic task from a theological blank slate. Every congregation inhabits a theological narrative tradition (even if the congregation expressly rejects the idea of association with a particular tradition!). The catholicity of missional congregations is rooted first in the historical event of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, mediated through the Holy Scriptures. But second, the catholicity of missional congregations is rooted also in the particular theological tradition within which the congregation is held, a tradition that has sought to bear witness to Jesus Christ in and through its own traditions of rationality and practices. This "bearing witness," or the construction of theological narratives within particular traditions, has been carried out both faithfully and unfaithfully, both with attention to the apostolic calling of the church and with ignorance of it. A constructive ecclesiology therefore will also attend to these "scripts" and recognize the way that the local congregation is informed by them but also at times brings those scripts into crisis, especially when the process of improvisation reveals inadequate content within the narrative for the apostolic task.

Thus a process is generated that is not unlike the Gadamerian hermeneutical spiral. As a local church community takes the risk to engage apostolically in their culturally pluralistic contexts, that community is forced to adapt and experiment in order to bear faithful witness to Christ. The

process of adaption itself is theological improvisation that is full of content that communicates the components of their own lived ecclesiology. That content is also informed and rooted in the theological traditions of the congregation. Yet the process also propels the community into a mode of self-criticism in which it may come to terms with the inherent conflictual nature of its own theological tradition, especially when that tradition fails to equip the congregation for its apostolic calling. This may bring challenge or even crisis, but it can also produce a process of re-discovery, whereby a congregation comes to value new or different parts of its own tradition that have been overlooked or undervalued, but which are now freshly illumined in the light of its apostolic task.

The laboratory for our research will be three American Reformed congregations that are intentionally seeking to engage with their culturally diverse environments out of commitment to mission in Christ's name. The reason for this is not only in order to have a controlled research pool, but also to demonstrate adequately the serious tension that exists within communities that value their theological heritage and traditions, even while they are called to incorporate new practices and cultural forms of community life. After this ethnographic evaluation in chapter 3, we will then move to deepen the analysis by taking the ecclesiological themes that emerge out of the qualitative research and bring those themes into conversation with theologians who are also in the Reformed tradition. These theologians and their ideas may at times be challenged by the lived theology of apostolic multi-ethnic congregation, but at times they will also be re-discovered and adapted for fresh purposes. The result will be a constructive ecclesiology, drawn from both inductive and deductive methodologies, that reflects the heritage of congregations and theologians operating within the Reformed tradition. But the greater aim is to demonstrate a theological process, grounded in a vision of the missional church, whereby a congregation and its

broader tradition may respond faithfully to the apostolic call in this new, culturally pluralistic context in which we all find ourselves. Hopefully this process will be useful not just for churches within the American Reformed tradition but also for any congregation that is seeking to adapt to its pluralistic context while remaining faithful to the gospel.

CHAPTER 3: ENGAGING THE EMBODIED BELIEFS AND LIVED THEOLOGIES OF DIVERSE CHURCHES IN MISSION

As stated in chapter two, a practical, missional ecclesiology requires that we begin with the local congregation and its context for mission. Rather than originate our theological explorations in a disembodied "essence" of the church, we begin with the concrete life of local congregations that are in the midst of "improvisation" for faithful expression of witness to the gospel. In doing such research we are not simply gathering data in order to inform a future theological task. Rather, in entering into the concrete life of the local congregation we are entering into a rich theological environment that carries tremendous potential for a constructive ecclesiology. As Browning states, every local congregation is a library of theological content whose practices express the theology laden within it.[161] Or in the words of one group of researchers, "Practices of faithful Christian people are themselves already the bearers of theology."[162] Truth is bound up not just in propositions about the church but also within the practices of the church's everyday life.

What sort of theology are we looking for when we examine the life of local congregations? In their book *Talking About God in Practice*, Helen Cameron and her colleagues propose that when researching a local congregation, there is a dynamic of distinct but overlapping and interrelated theological voices.[163] Specifically, they offer a description of four unique theological voices at play within congregations. These four voices are not meant to be a complete description of theology, but they provide a helpful tool to diagnose the kind of discrete but inseparable theological conversations at work within congregational life. These voices are:

---

[161] Browning, 40.
[162] Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeny, and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practices: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 51.
[163] *Ibid*., 53-56.

- *Espoused Theology*: This is the theology embedded within a group's articulation of its beliefs. It relates to what the congregation actually states about what it believes and what motivates its practices. Such theology could be embedded in mission statements, church values, or vocalization of beliefs and vision.
- *Operant Theology*: This is the theology that the congregation may not be consciously aware of but is nevertheless disclosed through the practices of congregational life. Congregational practices may reveal ways that the operant theology is aligned with the espoused theology and ways in which they are misaligned.
- *Normative Theology*: This is the named theological authority of the congregation. The normative theology of a congregation often relates to the ecclesial identities and relationships of the church. The normative theology may inform how the congregation approaches Scripture, what traditions and practices they value, and what is most celebrated, rejected or legitimated. Normative theologies can correct, inform and even be informed by espoused and operant theologies.
- *Formal Theology*: This is the theology of the academy or the "professional" theologian. This voice may echo through the other three, but this voice especially has bearing on the theological "scripts" that we will examine in chapter four. Formal theology can come into conflict with the practices of the church, but it also can help enable reflection and refinement of more practical theologies.

This model is beneficial in demonstrating the interconnectedness and mutual enhancement among the distinct streams of theology active within a local congregation. It tunes us in to the

ways theological work is happening within a church not just in theological committees or statements, but also within the lives and practices of the members.

For the purposes of this chapter, we are especially interested in two things as it relates to these four voices: First, what espoused and operant theologies emerge from Reformed congregations that are seeking to embody the gospel in culturally pluralistic contexts? Second, how do the intensely local espoused and operant theologies of these congregations come into conversation with and even in conflict with the supra-local normative theologies of their denominational and theological traditions and heritages? By discovering this theological interaction laden within the life of local congregations, we will then be prepared to bring that lived theology into conversation with more formal ecclesiology in chapter four.

Research and Interview Design

As stated in chapter 2, our laboratory for research is a selection of three diverse, American Reformed congregations. This selection provides a controlled research pool, but also helps demonstrates the tensions that exists within communities that value their theological heritage (as is common within Reformed churches), even while they are seeking to improvise for faithful apostolic witness.

The three churches were chosen based on the following factors: First, relevancy. I identified congregations that were in Reformed denominations and demonstrated through their websites and public materials that they valued their Reformed heritage; yet at the same time they explicitly named cultural diversity, racial reconciliation, racial justice, or multiethnicity as a central aspect of their church vision or mission. Second, location. I chose congregations that were located in diverse contexts and were seeking to engage with the diversity of people in their

geographical area. Third, accessibility. Recognizing that my interviews of church members would require trust, I chose congregations that I already had some degree of familiarity with, had previously visited, or within which I had a personal contact.

Interviews were conducted over a period of 11 months, between July 2015 and May 2016. Before making site visits, I contacted the pastors of each of the three churches, explained my project and research questions, and requested permission to use the church as a research site and to make personal visits. Additionally, I asked for suggestions from the pastors for names and contact information of members within the congregations who they deemed would make good interviewees.

When contacting potential interviewees, I introduced myself and the project, informed them of the pastor's suggestion that I speak to them, and requested permission to interview them. Upon securing their agreement, I emailed them a summary of the main research concern and a list of prepared questions in advance. Nearly all the interviews were conducted in person during my site visit of each of the three congregations, with the exception of a few people that were not available to meet during my visit, in which case I interviewed them later over the phone. In a number of cases, I followed up via email or phone with the interviewee at a later date for clarification or more information.

I conducted the interviews employing the "Responsive Interviewing" semi-structured technique, which emphasizes flexibility of design and expects the interviewer to adapt questions in response to what he or she is learning.[164] As stated above, I sent the interviewees a set of predetermined questions prior to the interview, but the interview itself was conducted in

[164] Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications), 7. See also Daniel Turner, "Qualitative Interview Design: A Practical Guide for Novice Investigators," *The Qualitative Report* (15:3, May 2010) 754-760.

conversational style, as I followed up on insights and stories with new clarifying and exploratory questions. I approached the interviews not as a detached observer but as an engaged learner, disclosing to the interviewees not only my personal interest in the subject but also my own role at the time as a pastor of a multi-ethnic congregation. This enabled a more honest and transparent conversation, in which each of us was able to approach the conversation as people with feelings, opinions and experiences. Nevertheless, I maintained the role of interviewer, focusing the conversation on my questions about the unique experiences and insights of the interviewee.

At the beginning of each interview, I requested permission to record the interview. I stored the recorded audio files of the interviews on a password-protected digital storage device, and then later transcribed the full interviews and destroyed the audio interview file. All transcribed interviews have been stored on a password protected external drive. The pastors of the three churches and other key leaders have given permission to use the names of the churches and their own names in the publication; their permission is indicated by a footnote in the text below noting the date of the interview. All other names have been changed to pseudonyms in order to protect privacy.

In addition to the interviews, during each site visit I sought to gather additional information that communicates the values and undergirding theological vision of the congregations. This included explicit communications such as liturgies, sermons, songs, hymns, bulletins, and mission and vision statements, but also implicit communications such as art and architecture, design and aesthetics of the facilities, stories told, arrangement of church organizational life, allocation of budget funds, and styles of leadership.

After examining each of the three congregations, we will then trace common theological themes that emerge from their practices.

New City Fellowship: Chattanooga, Tennessee

In the spring of 1968, Mr. Rudolph "Rudy" Schmidt was leading a Sunday School class at the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, an affluent white suburb of Chattanooga. The class was studying the book *Black and Free* by Tom Skinner,[165] an African American pastor and activist. Rudy was the dean of admissions at a small Presbyterian college on Lookout Mountain called Covenant College, and after reading this book, Rudy and his wife Collyn recruited several others from the church and a handful of Covenant College students and started the "Third Street Sunday School," an outreach effort to inner city children and youth of Chattanooga.

Within a couple of years, the Third Street Sunday school became a "Mission Church" of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Lookout Mountain, within the denomination that would eventually become the present-day Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). They began to meet at a local YMCA and a young seminary graduate named Randy Nabors became the pastor. From the very beginning, the church was focused not only on reaching out to care for underserved families in the inner city, but also to embody a culturally reconciled community. In a city that was marked by a long history of suspicion and distrust between the black and white communities, the leaders were especially concerned to see the message of Jesus Christ help bridge the racial divide. In an early description of their work, Rudy Schmidt wrote:

> Another thing we learned was that having a black/white church is not the easiest way to go, but we are convinced it is the right way for us. The pattern of the early church included Jews and Gentiles, which you will remember was not without problems either. But the apostolic solution was not to have two churches with Jews in one and Gentiles in the other. We learned that there is a big difference between welcoming blacks to be a part of a white church and having a truly inter-racial church. Or… even welcoming blacks into the leadership of the church but keeping all of the white ways of doing things. This we would condemn as paternalism… "You can come in, you can even run the church, but here is the way it is to be done." But for a truly inter-racial church a concerted effort must

[165] Tom Skinner, *Black and Free* (Zondervan, 1968).

> be made to enrich the service and the programs of the church with the black experience. That is not to say we need to be a black church with whites in attendance, but rather it must be a careful joining of the two traditions and cultures, with the minority group being given a voice in the conduct of the church disproportionate to its numbers.[166]

By 1976, the small mission church had grown and officially became a particularized congregation. Though some questioned whether remaining in the Presbyterian denomination was important, early leaders like the Schmidts were adamant that the congregation stay true to its Reformed roots and remain a Presbyterian church. The church took the name "New City Fellowship," signaling that it was seeking to bear witness to the future City of the Kingdom of God that was to come, described in Revelation 5 as constituting people from every "tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). In addition to embodying a reconciled community, the church focused its mission "to minister cross-culturally to the black community, to be inclusive and welcoming to the poor, and promote the radicalization of the middle class into ministries of justice and mercy."[167]

Forty years later, New City Fellowship (NCF) continues to thrive with the original vision in view. The congregation now meets in a traditional brick Presbyterian church building that it bought in the 1980s, located within the disadvantaged and mostly African-American Glenwood neighborhood of Chattanooga.[168] On a typical Sunday, hundreds of people, young and old, black, brown and white, stream into the sanctuary for two vibrant morning services. The sanctuary is graced with multiple banners made by artists in the congregation, displaying bold statements of God's faithfulness in the black, brown, tan and gold colors of an African motif.

---

[166] Rudy Schmidt, "Personal Reflections on New City Fellowship," undated.
[167] Randy Nabors, *Merciful: The Opportunity and Challenge of Discipling the Poor out of Poverty* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 41.
[168] During my site visits, early signs of gentrification were apparent. As of 2020, the Glenwood neighborhood has rapidly gentrified, displacing many long-time residents. Nevertheless, NCF's racial makeup has remained steady, given that NCF, in the words of Rev. Kevin Smith, has a "regional draw" even as it maintains a "geographic focus."

The most conspicuous banner displays the forty-year-old logo of the church, which also emblazons the front of the Sunday worship bulletin: three arms, one white, one black, and one brown, all reaching for and grasping onto a cross.

As the service begins, the diversity of people standing on the front chancel to lead the service is striking. An older white man sits at the piano, playing gospel-infused prelude music. He is Tony Hughes, the original music director of the church, whose influence looms large in this place. A middle-aged black man with a bright smile holds the lead microphone and calls the congregation to worship. He is Joe Bell, also a long-time member and leader in the congregation. Behind him, five young adults, black and white and brown themselves, stand cheerfully ready to lead the people in song.

In some ways, the service bears the marks of a typical Reformed service of worship: from a Psalm-based call to worship, to a confession of sin, to a baptism of an infant, to a strong emphasis on the reading and preaching of the Word of God, to the prayers of the people to the final benediction. But in many other ways, the service bears little resemblance to a typical Sunday morning in a Reformed church. The liturgy is creative and participatory, with lots of flexibility and call-and-responses. The gospel and jazz suffused worship music, backed by a large multi-racial choir, puts a fresh twist on classic hymns and contemporary worship songs. There is a great sense of joy combined with reverence, and there is much more emotion, physical expression and verbal participation from the congregation than is typical in a Presbyterian church. The senior pastor of the church, Rev. Kevin Smith, an African American minister who has been leading the church for several years since founding pastor Randy Nabors retired, preaches a long 40-minute expository sermon, riddled with references to Reformed theologians, yet at the same time punctuated with the poetic cadences, repetitive refrains, and modulated

volumes of classic African-American preaching. After the two-hour service concludes, the congregation spills outside onto the lawn and into the Fellowship Hall for lively conversation, raucous laughter, and sharing of coffee and food.

The espoused theology of New City Fellowship is clearly stated in its vision statement, prominently presented on the front cover of the bulletin: "To establish a cross-cultural worshipping community, centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ, that produces discipled believers who become God's instruments of grace, justice and mercy." Several elements are worth noting, especially in the way the church's espoused and operant theologies interrelate. First, the leaders of NCF view the church's identity as a "cross-cultural worshipping community." Although the congregation places a high value on the gathered worship of the church and views the Sunday services as the centerpiece of congregational life, few members associate the "church" strictly with the worship service, the Sunday morning gathering, or the church building. Even the worship service itself feels a bit more like a family gathering at times than a service of worship. During the greeting of peace, attendees do not politely shake hands but instead reach across pews, mingle around the sanctuary, and offer each other big bear hugs and warm embraces. During the congregational prayer time, the prayer leader encourages everyone to get in small groups of three to four people and pray for personal needs. At the benediction, everyone holds hands across the sanctuary as a sign of their family status in Christ. Mark Foster, a white man and former youth minister of the church, recounts his first visit to NCF in the late 1980s and his experience during the benediction. "One of the things NCF does is hold hands at the end [of the service]. I know that was the first time that I had physical contact with someone who was African American, a male, and I had interaction, conversation. It really rattled me, because I was barely a believer." His oldest and most enduring memory of over two decades in the church is

taking the hand of a person of another race in worship and being thrust into a kind of community he had never known.

When NCF members describe the church, the words most often used are "community," "family," and "home." One Latina member stated, "This place is home; I feel like I can be myself." She describes a white couple from the church that she lived with for a season as "my parents." She explains how the church community is different than other communities she has been a part of; here she can "be real" and tell people the truth about her experience and feelings. Another member, Frank Edwards, has been a member of NCF for about four years. Frank is a middle aged African American male who has lived in and out of homelessness and has often struggled with addiction. On a Sunday morning, he looks disheveled and unkempt compared to other members in their Sunday best. But when asked about NCF, he smiles and holds his arms out wide and then folds them around himself, as if being hugged. "This place loves me. I've never been to a place like this that has embraced everyone – no matter what you look like, no matter how you're dressed."

This theological image of family and community is intentional. As an example, the NCF church phone and pictorial directory is entitled the "Family Album." Kevin Smith, the senior pastor, often uses the images of the "body" and "family" to exhort the congregation from the pulpit, even addressing the church personally as "family" throughout the Sunday service. "I use the body image a lot," states Kevin. "And the fact that we are God's children, we are family together...we are kin. We are going to be together forever… these images really help the multi-ethnic church understand what it means to come together in a really beautiful way."[169] Strikingly, Kevin and other leaders of the church extrapolate the spiritual family theme from the Reformed

[169] Kevin Smith, Personal Interview. April 2, 2013.

emphasis on the Covenant. Whereas Reformed leaders often employ Covenantal Theology to emphasize the continuity of salvation between Old and New Testaments and to defend the practice of infant baptism,[170] when NCF leaders speak of Covenantal Theology they apply it to the inclusive nature of the new spiritual family in Christ. "Covenantal Theology flows freely" at NCF with the emphasis on the inclusive spiritual family, explains Kevin Smith. "It resonates with black culture, because the black family takes in everybody." Youth minister Mark Foster agrees. Covenant Theology has played a big part in shaping NCF, but the emphasis in that theology has been "the communal nature of the covenant, the fact that we are now God's family." NCF has evidently taken a classic theme from the Reformed theological library and re-framed it to help theologically ground their vision to be a cross-cultural community that includes many different kinds of people in the new spiritual family.

Practically, this emphasis on the church as spiritual family serves as an empowering theological metaphor when members struggle through cultural and relational conflicts, as often happens within multicultural and multiethnic churches. Just like in a regular family, "there's a lot of give and take…. You give up something of yourself and take something in," says member Shawn Wright. Joe Bell, long time member and the director of a local Community Development ministry that NCF founded, recalls the many times when relationship have been difficult because of cultural misunderstandings and mutual hurt. "But the call is both in forgiving and empowering…. This is a collective journey, and it is a struggle. It's a journey that requires investments from both sides… It's not complete with me and my black crew. It's not complete with you and your white crew." Many members speak of "staying at the table" when things get difficult. A person can easily walk away from an institution that dispenses religious services

[170] For example, see Bryan Chapell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?* (P&R Publishing, 2007).

when one's personal needs aren't being met; but few people would walk away from a family that loves them just because they may be unhappy. The "spiritual family" theology of NCF has enabled the members to endure forty years of joys and challenges in cross-cultural work.

Another notable interaction between the espoused and operant theologies within NCF relates to their commitment to be "centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ." NCF is a congregation of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), a conservative, evangelical Presbyterian denomination. In the classic conservative Reformed explanation of the gospel, the doctrine of justification plays a dominant role. The gospel is a message of good news about an individual's being "made right" with God through the propitiating death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[171] Standing within the conservative Reformed tradition, NCF affirms this dimension of the gospel and is conversionist in its preaching and teaching. Yet "the gospel" that is operant in the lives of the congregation clearly extends beyond the justification of individual souls. Collyn Schmidt, wife of the late Rudy Schmidt and one of the founding members of NCF, states that from the beginning of NCF, the founders believed that "the gospel affects every corner of our lives, and people must see that at our church."[172] Mark Foster explains, "The gospel is more than just personal salvation. The gospel is also reconciliation, and a lot of those [Bible] passages are the driving passages here." When the gospel is spoken about at NCF, Scripture passages are reiterated that emphasize the communal, social dimension of the gospel such as Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28, more often than Scriptures that emphasize the individualistic, forensic dimension of salvation. Additionally, language about the eschatological "Kingdom of God" and imagery from the Synoptic Gospels are often used to describe the

[171] See the explanation of the gospel by leading PCA pastor Stephen Smallman in his book, *What Is True Conversion?* (P&R Publishing, 2005).
[172] Collyn Schmidt. Personal Interview. July 11, 2015.

meaning of the gospel. "It's by you and me blending together that makes the Kingdom of God, that makes that tapestry. That is the gospel," states Joe Bell. "The gospel" within the social imaginary of NCF is not only about the spiritual rescue of individuals but also about the restoration of community and creation. Thus their mission to "become God's instruments of grace, justice and mercy" in Chattanooga is not just a social expression of their personal faith but is germane to their understanding of the content and reach of the Christian message.

The gospel that NCF members proclaim also tends to have as much a future orientation toward the coming Kingdom of God as it does a past orientation on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even the name of the church "New City" reflects anticipation of what is to come rather than preservation of what was behind, the latter of which is suggested by the name of the mother congregation "Reformed Presbyterian Church." "This vision of blacks and whites together, that's what the body of Christ is, you know, all sorts of people getting together, because that's what heaven will be like," states Shawn Wright. "The vision of heaven, both in Isaiah and Revelation, reflects what NCF looks like on a Sunday morning … it's a taste of what is to come," agrees Mark Foster. Tony Hughes, the director of music, simply states, "This is what heaven will be like." The gospel of NCF is a gospel that doesn't just celebrate the past events of salvation history but anticipates the future Kingdom of God.

For those leaders in NCF that are self-consciously Reformed in their thinking, this emphasis on a "bigger gospel," a gospel that is not only personal but also communal and social, a gospel that extends back to the past and also toward the future, has meant drawing from streams of historic Reformed theology that are beyond the mainstream of the conservative Reformed evangelical tribe. Tony Hughes, one of the original members of NCF and the music director for 40 years, recalls that in the early days of NCF the group of founders were influenced by a stream

of Dutch Reformed thinking that he describes as "reformationalist" or "transformationalist." In coming under the influence of this aspect of the Reformed tradition that emphasizes the transformation of all things through Christ, Hughes recalls that "I was liberated by the thought that I could be a Reformed Christian and I was not shackled by some sort of 'get away from the world' thing. We were in the world. We were re-making the world, redeeming culture." Justin Allen, one of the original black college students recruited by the Schmidts to start Third Street Sunday School, explains that "Yes, we are Reformed, but we are committed to a transformational model." In seeking to bear witness to Christ in a diverse, impoverished environment, the NCF community was led to discover and even reconstruct aspects of their own tradition that helped create a local theology that accentuates the reconciling, restorative work of God for humanity and creation.

In comparing the espoused and operant theologies of NCF, there are clearly deep resonances between the two, especially as it relates to their commitment to be a "cross-cultural worshipping community" and to be "centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ." Yet when these local theologies are brought into conversation with the normative theologies of NCF, tensions arise. One example of this tension relates to worship. Given their place in the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), NCF abides by the "regulative principle" of worship, common to conservative Reformed congregations.[173] Justin Allen notes that at NCF "We do use the regulatory principle here, but those [principles] are shaped by your culture. The white people won't acknowledge this. They think 'This is just the way it is because it's biblical.' But we say, actually there are many ways it which it can be [biblical] here." The Senior Pastor Kevin Smith, though deeply committed to the Reformed tradition and theology, experiences conflict in trying

[173] See discussion of Regulative Principle in Chapter 1, above.

to lead a multicultural church as a minority pastor in a majority white denomination. "The Reformed churches have sometimes baptized the culture," he explains, "What they consider as biblical norms, especially in worship, are really cultural norms, and they don't see the difference. To most, 'biblical worship' is just normal. But normal always looks white, like the dominant culture."[174]

As the worship director, Tony Hughes has been keenly aware of this tension and sought to expand the parameters of what "biblical worship" looks like by drawing from the rich musical resources of the black tradition. "Very early on we became cognizant of the importance of emotion and the expression of emotion in our worship," explains Hughes. He began to draw on musical settings and styles from the African American tradition that emphasize emotional expressions of the heart more than theology-laden lyric-heavy European hymns. "It seemed to be pretty evident from the very get-go that the gospel and black music had a lot in common- it had the sound of joy and sorrow all blended together. As far as I could tell, that's what the black people wanted to sing about." Biblical descriptions of worship in the Psalms of hand clapping, shouting and expressions of emotion were explored and then incorporated into the definition of "biblical worship," in addition to the traditional parameters of that regulative term. As a result of this experimentation, many life-long Presbyterians like the Schmidts came to grasp and cherish different aspects of the Christian faith that would not have been possible in a setting where strict regulative forms were followed. "We've all gotten a bigger taste of heaven," says Mark Foster, "we all together have a bigger view of God."

Nevertheless, the challenge remains. "Our commitment to the PCA [denomination] has been both pleasurable and awful, both pleasurable and horrific," Joe Bell says bluntly. Especially

[174] Smith.

in the light of recent racial tensions within the United States, leaders of NCF have been dismayed by the responses and reactions of fellow pastors and leaders within the PCA. At a recent General Assembly, Green listened as his friend and pastor Kevin Smith preached to the entire assembly about the call of the gospel to combat racism and systemic injustice. Bell was encouraged by the opportunity Smith was given, but recounts that in light of offensive and ignorant remarks of fellow delegates, "It was so hard to stay positive. I was so angry. I was so mad. But I am committed, I know that this is where God has me." NCF remains an uncomfortable anomaly within its denominational community, even as it bears witness to a new way of expressing the Reformed faith in a multicultural context.

Church of All Nations: Minneapolis, Minnesota

Rev. Jin S. Kim never intended to plant a new church. In the early 2000s, "Pastor Jin" was serving as an associate pastor at a large 1st and 2nd generation Korean Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis. One of the three morning services was English speaking, and gradually the English-speaking service began to attract a more diverse set of attenders: Sudanese and Kenyans, Vietnamese and Chinese, in addition to white spouses and friends of Korean-American members. Recognizing what was happening and the need to establish a new church to reach the growing multicultural populations of Minneapolis, the Korean Presbyterian Church soon commissioned Pastor Jin, as well as about 100 other members, to plant "Church of All Nations" (CAN) as a new Presbyterian congregation within the PC(USA) in January 2004. At the time, the name of the church felt premature, if not presumptuous, as there was only a smattering of non-Korean members among the core group. But the vision was clear: "The church's origin in Acts 2 included people from all over the world, all different languages and ethnicities coming together,"

Pastor Jin told a reporter that first Sunday. "And Revelation 7 talks about the Kingdom of God as all tribes, tongues and all nations coming to glorify God in one voice. So the church's origin is Pentecost, its destination is the Kingdom of God, and both are multicultural."[175] In another communication Pastor Jin wrote, "I believe God has called us to be salt and light to the nations, calling us to participate in the work of reconciliation in Christ. As the most culturally diverse nation the world has ever known, we commit to being a house of prayer for *all* nations."[176]

Almost exactly two years later, CAN moved its gatherings from its Korean "mother church" to a declining white PCUSA congregation that had plenty of space for a young, growing congregation. After renting for a few months, the leaders of Shiloh Bethany Presbyterian Church asked if they might merge with CAN. Subsequent to a congregational dissolution, the remaining members of Shiloh Bethany joined CAN and gifted them the property, including a lovely church building overlooking a beautiful lake and wooded park in Northeast Minneapolis.

Within a few years, "Church of All Nations" (CAN) was living up to its name, with more than 25 nations represented within the congregation. Today, any visitor who steps into the church building will immediately recognize the diverse international expressions of the congregation. The hallways are lined with pictures, paintings and maps from Africa, Asia and South and Central America. Native American quilts and an Indian Prayer Mandala hang just outside the sanctuary. The sanctuary itself displays flags from over 50 different nations on both sides of the room. As congregants mingle in for the Sunday morning service, one glimpses a toddler crawl by in traditional Vietnamese dress, or the bright colors of a Kenyan shirt worn by one of the African pastors. Pastor Jin himself dons a traditional Korean shirt to display his own family's heritage,

[175] Stephen Scott. "Church Welcomes Many Cultures." *St. Paul Pioneer Press* Jan 5, 2004. Print.
[176] Jin S. Kim, "A Message from our Pastor," Church of All Nations church brochure. Undated.

but another week he may wear a robe from Dubai or South Africa to honor other cultures represented in his congregation.

CAN's espoused theology is clear. "To be a church for others and a church of all nations" is written prominently on the front of its bulletin. The church's lengthier vision statement explains their theological vision:

> At Pentecost, a multicultural, multilingual, multinational gathering of people witnessed to the mighty acts of God. Likewise, the kingdom of God is a place where a great multitude from every nation, tribe, and tongue will stand before the throne of the Lamb shouting, "Salvation belongs to our God!" The church is the provisional reality of the in-breaking of God's reign between Pentecost and the coming kingdom.
>
> While we recognize the continuing role of the mono-ethnic church in advancing the heavenly kingdom, we also affirm the increasing need for multicultural churches in an increasingly multicultural society to offer hope of racial/cultural/generational reconciliation and healing by living out the gospel of peace. We envision a day when, in the context of a local church, each culture can be affirmed as a gift from God, and each culture challenged of inherent idolatries by a beloved community speaking the truth in love.
>
> We proclaim that in Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, poor or rich, black or white, young or old, recent or settled immigrants, Catholic or Protestant, for Christ has torn down all human barriers through the power of the cross. In the increasingly multicultural context that is North America, we dare not limit the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to one race, one class, or one culture.[177]

Several things are worth noting about CAN's theological vision. First, it is markedly eschatological. Similar to the language we heard at NCF, there is a future orientation to the identity of the church, which here is called a "provisional reality" of the future multicultural Kingdom of God. Second, there is clearly a *telos* to this social reality of the church, beyond the mutual edification of the members. There is a stated need for multicultural churches to "offer hope" of reconciliation in the face of a divided culture. CAN bears an innate sense of missional

[177] "Our Vision" http://www.cando.org/our-vision/ (accessed 10 June 2016).

calling to demonstrate the efficacy of the Christian message to accomplish something that others need, in this case cultural reconciliation.

The statement also expresses how this new multicultural community will come into being: to be a social reality in which "each culture can be affirmed as a gift from God, and each culture challenged of inherent idolatries *by a beloved community speaking the truth in love*." In speaking to many members of CAN and observing congregational life, it is apparent that this theological image of "beloved community," a phrase borrowed from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,[178] is by far the dominant *operant* image by which the congregation understands itself and its calling. There are several ways this theological model is expressed.

First, the CAN congregation understands "church" as principally defined not by the event of worship, the sacraments, or programs of the church, but by the people themselves constituted by God as a *new spiritual family*. As one of their core values states, "We are committed to intimate fellowship *as family*." This vision of the church as family is expressed in numerous ways, from the way members address one another to the home-cooked family meal after every Sunday worship service. One member, Marie Page, recalls the first time she attended a worship service at CAN and experienced the "Passing of the Peace." "I was used to the pretty sedate traditional Minnesotan version- shake the hand of the person behind and in front of you, and then you sit down. This was like, people go all the way out of their pews, people in the aisles, children running amok. Everyone is legitimately happy to see each other, to be around each other. I could feel that 'welcome energy' the first time I came. I didn't know that was actually possible in church. I said, okay, this is what I am looking for in church, without knowing it." Significantly,

[178] Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998).

Page discloses that after growing up in a difficult family of origin, "[CAN] is family in a way my family never really was."[179]

Several members attribute this family atmosphere of the church to Pastor Jin and his formation within Korean culture. JinSoo Kim, the Director of Worship who is also Korean, stated that "Pastor Jin has openly said that he's architecting the culture here by modeling it after his immigrant experience, which was that of an extended family… He sees himself as head of the household of an extended family, or as a village chief in an Asian or Korean village. This also has to do with the direction of theology we are doing. Instead of Kingship, [we're] going into kinship. What I mean by this is we move from institutional government type of things to a more kinship relational way."[180] Paul Moses, another member who is an immigrant from India, stated similarly, "The basis of our church culture is Korean. In Korean culture they have this thing called *jung* which refers to giving openly, not expecting anything in return. It means being open and kind and generous, and that has shaped the culture here." There is a much greater cultural consciousness at CAN than is typical in a mono-cultural American congregation, and in this case an effort is made to move away from a Western, individualistic model of spirituality and embrace a non-Western communal vision for congregational life. This is not just a functional decision in how church is done, but a theological one in how church is conceived.

One concrete expression of this communal vision of church is in the emphasis CAN puts on "intentional community" and community housing. Pastor Jin's family and the church own several houses adjacent to the church property for members of the church to live in together and practice a community model of living. One of the homes is named "Fink House" after the community-based illegal seminary that German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonheoffer

[179] Marie Page. Personal Interview. 20 May 2016.
[180] Jin Soo Kim. Personal Interview. 21 May 2016.

established in 1935. Around 40 people, single and married, mostly between the ages of 20 and 40, live together at CAN's own Finkenwalde, in six other homes near the church, and even in the basement of the church building. Several cars are owned by the church for common use by anyone who may need an automobile. It's clear that at CAN, "community" is not just a word to describe the good intentions of a church program, but for many is a literal way of life that the church supports and sustains.

Another way this operant communal theology is expressed is through the obvious way CAN serves as a place or community of "healing" to many who end up there. Numerous individuals cited the broken or painful dimensions of their previous experiences before coming to CAN: "Before I came here I was desperate," "We were still recovering from another church situation," "I'm a misfit, and I found a home here." Among those interviewed, there were divorcees and failed church planters, recovering addicts and those struggling with mental illness, and many people with significant past resentment toward the institutional church. Shane and Renae Long are a couple that transitioned to CAN from a painful church planting experience. At CAN they found a community that is "welcoming, inclusive and healing, a place where you can just come and *be*…for us it has become a family."[181] CAN has become a community of "healing" for those seeking restorative relationships after painful experiences.

This language of "healing" in community is not just employed to describe emotional healing, but also psychological healing. The congregation focuses much of its discipleship and spiritual formation on helping members recognize ways they have been held captive to racist and oppressive systems that are antithetical to God's counter-cultural Kingdom. Many people, especially those from the dominant culture, speak about the ways CAN has opened their eyes to

[181] Shane and Renee Long. Personal Interview. 20 May 2016.

see dimensions of their captivity to racialized ways of thinking and behaving. As an example, Laura Newby came to CAN right out of university. She describes her experience at CAN as "my salvation." She explains, "It's been my own liberation. There's so much about the way that our culture shapes white Americans that is harmful for every other race in this country but is also devastating to white people too. [This church] has helped me make sense of my experience, and to show me a different way that was just mind blowing. It has really, really spoken to the deep parts of me that I didn't know how to give rise to, that were just kind of being pushed under the dominant narrative of our culture."[182] Others speak of "self-differentiation," and how the grace of God frees a person to be herself, rather than what others demand her or expect her to be. At CAN, the work of "reconciliation" has a significant internal, psychological dimension to it, as participation in a multicultural community empowers individuals to heal and grow into a healthier person.

A third way that the "beloved community" and "spiritual family" images are at work in CAN as a powerful operant theology is through their practice of cultural mutuality and exchange. Because no single ethnicity is in a majority at CAN, there is a ubiquitous sense that CAN is a church in which one can "be yourself" and not conform to majority cultural norms. JinSoo Kim describes it in this way: "I am not exactly Korean. I am not exactly American. In the past, I had to subscribe myself to the dominant culture of the church, because most of the churches I've been to – either Korean or American – were mono-cultural. But here, I can be myself without having to do the charade."[183] This invitation to "be yourself" is expressed powerfully in one of the most important Sundays of the year at CAN: Pentecost Sunday. Every Pentecost, members

[182] Laura Newby, Personal Interview. May 19, 2016.
[183] Jin Soo Kim.

come arrayed in their own cultural dress, and instead of a sermon that Sunday, anyone is invited to testify to the ways God has been at work in their lives.

This freedom to "be yourself" at CAN is not just an invitation to be authentic, but is an invitation to *contribute*. Lucy Mungai and her husband immigrated to Minneapolis from Kenya, and had trouble finding a church that expressed values that were similar to those they had known in the East African church. When they started attending CAN, they were struck immediately by "the hospitality, the warmth, and the freedom to be you- it was so moving. I am not saying that I have super gifts, but whatever little I have, to feel that that counts, that it's important, was a big part of us wanting to be here." [184]

Lucy's words suggest a pattern of cultural exchange that is striking in the way that CAN goes about fostering a diverse community. Moving beyond simply welcoming people of diverse cultures, the church also seeks to incorporate aspects of those cultures into congregational life that bear the image of God. "We want people to really know that their culture not only is welcome here but will impact the church," says Pastor Jin. "The church will change because of them. That's a bigger claim than I find many churches willing to make."[185] For example, when Native American pastor Jim Bear Jacobs began attending CAN with his wife, the congregation took interest in the ways that Jim Bear incorporated Native American spiritual practices with his Christian faith. Before long, the church was including "smudging" in its healing services, which is a Native American practice of generating cleansing smoke through burning of plants and other natural materials. "In the past I've had to separate my spiritual practice as a Native American from my faith," says Jacobs. "But here, I was asked by others, Could you offer who you are to

[184] Lucy Mungai, Personal Interivew. 21 May 2016.
[185] Nikki Tundel (6 June 2012). Minnesota Mix: Church of All Nations "a bunch of misfits." http://www.mprnews.org/story/2012/06/06/arts/multicultural-church

our congregation? I could be truly authentically who I am."[186] It's clear that this practice of cultural reception does not result in a wholesale acceptance of every kind of cultural practice represented in the congregation. As the vision statement expresses, CAN seeks to be a church in which "each culture can be affirmed as a gift from God, and each culture challenged of inherent idolatries by a beloved community speaking the truth in love." JinSoo Kim sees this in action: "We are able to see the toxicity and the goodness from each culture and then take it on as our own."[187]

Understandably, this creates challenges within the church. "Even within the same family people have different ways of viewing the world," explains Lucy Mungai. "So you can imagine that with all this diversity, what that means sometimes for the church. It can be very challenging…sometimes we fail."[188] Shane Long describes the difficulty of being in intimate community with people who are so culturally different. "It's one thing to want to be multicultural," he says, "It's another thing to really live that out and know that's going to be painful, difficult, challenging, humbling, and there are going to be times I will be really angry. But if that's really the work of the cross, really the work of reconciliation, it's worthwhile work. We need to see the church differently: not just a place to escape, to get what I want. Church is a place to engage. The church is a living body of people, we heal together, we minister together."[189] CAN's theology of church as "spiritual family" and "beloved community" empowers the congregation to persevere through cultural and relational challenges, motivating members to put the mutual exchange and edification of the body ahead of personal gratification.

[186] Jim Bear Jacobs. Personal Interview. 21 May 2016.
[187] JinSoo Kim.
[188] Mungai.
[189] Long.

The mutual exchange of cultures does not only generate challenge however; it also generates an array of gifts to those who choose to engage. First, there is the joy of mutual submission that happens in a diverse environment in which differences are not easily hidden away. In the early days of CAN, an episode occurred during a Sunday worship service that has taken on almost legendary proportions in the congregation. After a stirring sermon in which the preacher called for mutual love and submission, an older Korean man approached the chancel and laid a sword on the communion table. In Korean culture, this action is a symbolic demonstration of relinquishment and surrender. The action has become a powerful reminder in the minds of the members to "lay down their sword" of power and privilege, and to take up humility with one another that characterizes Christ. Such gifts could only come in a congregation that chooses to wrestle authentically with cultural conflict.

Another gift that results from mutual exchange of cultures is a more capacious experience of faith. "There is an incredible relational wealth that comes from the witness of so many different cultures," says Page. Having grown up in a homogenous environment in which according to her "certain idiosyncrasies or dysfunctions of that particular cultural framework became codified and reified," she now is finding space to understand herself and God through a more spacious lens.[190] Renae Long says much the same. "As we invite other voices in, like the Native voice, the African voice, and so on, it brings us to more of a holistic understanding of spirituality and God." Her husband Shane agrees, "There are things from other cultures and ethnic backgrounds that we can learn from – gifts and resources that sometimes the white community doesn't see."[191] The very thing that makes multicultural community so challenging-

[190] Page.
[191] Long.

diverse perspectives on life, faith and spirituality – is what many in CAN have also learned to most treasure as a keystone for their personal faith maturation.

It is clear that CAN's espoused and operant theologies are aligned around a strong theology of spiritual community. But how do the congregation's local theologies relate to the normative theology of its Reformed denominational and theological heritage? Whereas a degree of ambivalence toward the Reformed and Presbyterian heritage was expressed in personal opinions of some members of New City Fellowship, that ambivalence is literally codified at Church of All Nations. The "Our Identity" statement of the church articulates the following: "We are a *penitently Presbyterian* congregation, appreciative of the many gifts that this tradition has offered to the larger church and world, but mindful that denominationalism is itself a sign of the sectarianism, brokenness and disobedience of the body of Christ." The phrase "penitently Presbyterian" or "apologetically Reformed" was used by numerous members of the congregation throughout the interviews. On the one hand, as affirmed in the statement above, there is an appreciation of the tradition and a willingness to be identified as such. Indeed, there are notable ways that the Reformed theological tradition is adapted and re-framed by the members of CAN to express their own missional commitments. Numerous members cited the Reformed doctrine of the sovereignty of God, for example, as a theological catalyst toward community and reconciliation. "If God is sovereign, it means we are all kin," explains John Nelson. "It gives us a universal sense of humanity as all brothers and sisters, and hence the urgent need for the ministry of reconciliation."[192] Pastor Jin is even more explicit:

> "Since God is sovereign over male and female, slave and free, Jew and gentile, since God and God's sovereignty raised the church up at Pentecost in its full diversity, and in Revelation chapter 7 the churches' end is the diversity of tribes, tongues and nations glorifying God in one voice. And I say to all white churches, when they tell me they are in an environment within a 50 mile square radius of all white people basically, I say,

[192] Nelson.

> that's fine, so you are a Presbyterian church, do you have good representation of poor white people in your church? No. How about young white people? No. How about blue collar, lower class white people, or undereducated white people? No. Well, then you need to take multiculturalism really seriously, because class is a form of culture, gender is a form of culture, single parenting is a kind of culture. No congregation is exempt from the move toward multiculturalism, which only magnifies the sovereignty of God."[193]

A doctrine like the sovereignty of God, which in some injudicious instances has served as a retardant for mission within the Reformed community, in this case is employed by Pastor Jin and other CAN members as a theological rationale for more effective outreach to the local community. God's sovereignty places a "claim" on the church to represent a local environment in all its diversity, for God's claim is over all. This kind of appreciation of the Reformed tradition combined with a creative theological adaptation of its traditional form is common at CAN.

Nevertheless, CAN is only willing to call itself Presbyterian and Reformed in a posture of "penitence." This seems to be the case for at least two reasons. One, there is an acknowledgement that the Reformed tradition has been oppressive toward non-Western cultures, and in general has not been a theological environment that is hospitable for cultural difference. Two, because there is a conviction at CAN that the existence of denominations themselves is a failure of God's vision for reconciliation. Because CAN has a theological impulse toward reconciliation, and because they see the beauty in diverse cultural perspectives represented in different approaches to faith, they naturally are resistant to cementing themselves in one theological tradition. Pastor Jin, at least, sees this as a potential way forward for the renewal of the American Reformed churches. "Those churches that can imagine life beyond the Reformed movement are the ones who will ultimately bring renewal to the Reformed movement," he says. In this way, the Reformed watchword "Reformed and ever Reforming" takes on new meaning at

[193] Jin S. Kim.

a place like CAN. Rather than insiders renewing the tradition through more careful theological analysis, multicultural Reformed churches like CAN suggest that renewal may happen through a surprising voice from the outside.

Spirit and Truth Fellowship: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

On the corner of 6th and Cayuga Ave. in the Hunting Park neighborhood of North Philadelphia stands an old, non-descript building that barely resembles a church. Its dilapidated façade reflects the economically depressed environment of the neighborhood around it. But a casual walk around the building immediately reveals that something dynamic is happening on this urban block. Children flow out of the doors of the church building mid-morning for recess, some of the 200 or so students of the Hunting Park Christian Academy. One block away stands the beautifully renovated Ayuda Community Center, home to a vocational school, free legal clinic, an after school program, and other direct services. Across the street, a bike shop buzzes with activity, refurbishing old bicycles and employing urban youth for vocation development. The epicenter of all this activity is the church, Spirit and Truth Fellowship (STF), a medium sized congregation of about 250 members that has sought to bear witness to the presence of the Kingdom of God on this block for about 20 years.

On a typical Sunday morning, the sanctuary is raucous with activity before the service begins. Children run around the room, students cluster together laughing and twiddling on their phones, and people of many different ethnicities and ages mill around the room hugging and conversing. A professional looking white man in a tie talks casually with a young tattooed Latino man in a mechanic's uniform. The band members take their place, a group just as diverse as the congregation, and begin the prelude to the service of worship. The crowd comes to a hush; some

are praying silently, some are raising their hands, others are seated with heads bowed. The band transitions from the preparation music into a black gospel hymn, and the congregation raises their voices, while the pastor, Manny Ortiz, picks up his flute and joins the band. After the song, three liturgists stand and read a section of Scripture in Spanish, Korean and English, respectively. It is a picture of rich diversity in Spirit-led harmony.

Spirit and Truth Fellowship (STF) has not always been such a culturally diverse congregation. After planting several urban congregations in Chicago, Manny and his wife Blanca, as well as their dear friends and partners in ministry Sue and Randy Baker, relocated to Philadelphia when Manny took a faculty position at Westminster Theological Seminary.[194] Before long the two couples had planted a new church out of one of their homes in the predominantly Hispanic Fairhill neighborhood. Like the Fairhill neighborhood, the church was predominantly Hispanic, worshipping in both Spanish and English and deriving much of its identity from the Latino community. However, as the church grew they began to look for a better location to gather, and a Baptist church about 15 blocks north in the Hunting Park neighborhood contacted them about taking over their building in a community that no longer reflected their white, aging congregation. So as STF moved to this new location, the leaders understood the transition as a call from God to grow in cultural diversity in order to reflect their new context. "We did not really come to plant a multiethnic church," recalls Sue Baker. "What we do is plant churches to reach communities, whatever the community is. This happens to be a multiethnic community, so we ended up with a multiethnic church."[195] Today, in a neighborhood that is

[194] WTS is a conservative Reformed seminary in Philadelphia. The mission of WTS: "Westminster Theological Seminary, through a world-class faculty with a faithfully Reformed and confessional curriculum, trains students to serve in roles of the global church in the 21st century, including pastors and theologians, to the glory of God." Retrieved from www.wts.edu

[195] Sue Baker. Personal Interview. 15 August 2015.

about 20% white, 35% African American, 35% Latino, and 10% "other,"[196] the congregation is an exceptionally accurate reflection of its host community.

Like the other congregations we have examined, STF spells out their espoused theology through what they call their "Mission and Commitments" statement.

> "The mission of Spirit and Truth Fellowship CRC[197] is to utilize all the believers in edifying one another and doing the work of the ministry in the North Philadelphia (particularly East Hunting Park) community. This entails the involvement of Christians to evangelize others, plant churches, and develop ministries designed to bring about community transformation as a witness to the grace of God and the Lordship of Christ."
>
> As a gathering of believers, we have the following commitments:
>
> - We are committed to INCARNATIONAL ministry. By this we mean that we want to work, serve, and share our lives in the community in which we live. We don't separate our life into sacred and secular components, nor do we separate our life in the church from our life in the community.
> - We are committed to MULTI-ETHNIC ministry. We celebrate the different racial backgrounds and experiences which God has given us. No racial group is looked down upon or in any way excluded from the life of the church; on the contrary, each culture contributes to the beautiful variety of expressions in our worship, service, and outreach.
> - We are committed to the DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP. We are training people from this community to take the leadership positions in the church and other ministries.
> - We are committed to minister among the POOR. We find that Scripture clearly places God on the side of the poor and oppressed. As a church, we never want to lose the "Galilean" direction of Christ, who spent much of His time ministering among the poor, the hopeless, the outcasts, and those rejected by society.
> - We are committed to WHOLISTIC ministry. Our ministries are designed to meet the needs of the whole person. We attempt to address, in addition to the spiritual needs, the physical, educational, emotional, social, employment, legal, housing, and health needs of people.
> - We are committed to RECONCILIATION and to the tearing down of the walls between people and God and between racial and ethnic groups, economic classes, and men and women.
> - We are committed to JUSTICE, both personal and structural. We advocate on behalf of those who have been sinned against and harmed by injustices and who often have little or no other recourse.

[196] Data from the most recent US Census, retrieved from www.census.gov on 16 June 2016.
[197] Christian Reformed Church

- We are committed to CHURCH PLANTING. We desire to see many churches, schools, community centers, and other ministries in this and other cities, which proclaim the powerful, healing, saving message of the Gospel.[198]

Though members rarely recount the details of this garrulous statement, it's clear that key aspects of the mission and commitments have found their way into the operant theologies of the practices and beliefs of the members. One dominant descriptor contains much of the ethos of the church's commitments: "community church." This phrase "community church" is used again and again to describe what people envision when they think of the identity and calling of STF. "The vision of this church is to be a community church," says long time member Tina Clark. The phrase plainly has a dialectic meaning for the congregation, describing both the *internal* culture of the church and the *external* mission to its surrounding community.

Internally, "community church" describes how the members think of themselves and what constitutes it as a congregation. Fundamentally, members see STF as a place of "radical welcome," extending hospitality that is grounded in the radical grace of God. One member described STF as possessing a "grace-saturated culture." Considering the conservative evangelical doctrinal positions of STF, it is notable that this "radical welcome" is understood by the congregation to be grounded *theologically* in the doctrine of grace, not in a social commitment to tolerance or inclusion. "Understanding the grace of God levels the playing field and has allowed us to become one of the most welcoming churches," explains Sue Baker. "We have ex-addicts, ex-convicts, we have welfare, we have professionals, doctors, lawyers, teachers. We're not just multiethnic; we are multiclass, multigenerational, from brand new babies to an 80 year old. Only the grace of God can do that. Reformed teaching has helped us develop that."[199]

[198] *Mission and Commitments.* (n.d.). Retrieved 16 June 2016, from http://www.spiritandtruthfellowship.org/about.html
[199] Baker, *ibid.*

Similarly, Pastor Ortiz reflects, "The cross levels us. Even among our folks, if you are not poor, you really have a disdain for the poor. You know what they smell like and you don't want to be around them. But I think a Reformed faith erases that disdain."[200] Pastor Ortiz is known for his vulnerability and transparency in the pulpit, and for his consistent reminder to the congregation that because they are sinners saved by grace, the church is now a place of radical grace-based welcome where real people with real problems come to be made new. Significantly, this emphasis on *sola gratia* is a self-consciously Reformed emphasis, but the doctrine is given a distinct *sociological* application in this highly diverse congregation.

Like the other congregations we have examined, STF takes on a "family" ethos as a result of this spirit of welcome. Worship services feel more like casual family gatherings than rigid liturgical services. Every week, Pastor Ortiz leads a time of "family sharing" in which he celebrates and communicates about "family matters," such as a member who recently gained her American citizenship, or a student who graduated from vocational school. The majority of the congregation is involved in "growth cells," home groups that provide community, support and accountability for individuals and families throughout the week. One group member stated that the growth cells minister to the needs of the church members much more effectively than the pastors ever could, and help "link the members to the broader goals and ideas of the Kingdom."[201] "Being at Spirit and Truth has helped me live more inter-dependently as a body of Christ," says Marie Anderson, "rather than just showing up on Sunday."

Seeing themselves as a "community church" also enables the members to understand church as a community of mutuality and exchange, rather than an institution that provides services for its members. Worship gatherings are times not for professionals to perform, but for

[200] Ortiz, *ibid.*
[201] Cell Group Interview, November 2004.

members to bring expressions of their culture. A typical Sunday morning may include Black gospel, Spanish *corritos* (choruses), praise and worship songs, and traditional hymns. Baker, who often plays piano in the band, explains that "We are always looking for new, indigenous music, rather than translations borrowed from the Anglo culture. Many of the Spanish *corritos* are indigenous, but it's really hard to find indigenous Korean songs. In another cultural expression, one member sometimes presents hip-hop lyrics that are solidly Reformed."[202] This practice of interculturation is not just a mark of worship at STF, but also the way the church shapes many of its other internal community interactions as well. Members speak of how this practice opens them up to understand the gospel and the Scriptures differently and more fulsomely. "The multiethnic church provides us with a more comprehensive understanding of the Scriptures," writes Pastor Ortiz in his book *One New People*. "The insights of others help us to see things that our blinders shut out before. It tells us that we need each other (1 Cor. 12:12-27); one part cannot tell another, 'I have no need of you.'" Not only does this enable members to grasp a bigger picture of God and the gospel through diverse cultural lenses, but it also helps the congregation grow in the practices of love and forbearance. "One of the things I love about this congregation is that nobody ever gets their way," says Anderson. "We are always learning to bend toward one another."

The phrase "Community church" not only describes the theology and practices of STF's internal approach to relationships, but also describes their external approach to mission and community development. First, building on their commitment to incarnational ministry, STF strives to reflect in its congregational life the neighborhood community in which the church is

[202] Larry Sibley (March 2004). "You Want Salsa or Kimchi with that? Spirit and Truth Fellowship." Retrieved from http://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2004/you-want-salsa-or-kimichi-spirit-and-truth-fellowship-philadelphia-pennsylvania

located. “Our principle is this: you’ve got to take your cues from the community,” says Baker. “That’s our principle, whether it’s where you want to put your church, how your church is going to look, what kind of ministries you are going to have.”[203] Whether it’s the kind of music that is chosen for Sunday mornings or the intentional diversity recruited for staff and church leadership, STF is intent on looking like the community in which it dwells.

Additionally, STF fundamentally understands itself as a hyperlocal congregation that exists for the healing and transformation of the Hunting Park neighborhood. As the mission statement articulates, STF exists “to utilize all the believers in edifying one another and doing the work of the ministry in the North Philadelphia (particularly East Hunting Park) community. This entails the involvement of Christians to evangelize others, plant churches, and develop ministries designed to bring about community transformation as a witness to the grace of God and the Lordship of Christ.” One member contrasted this persistent neighborhood focus of STF to his previous experience in a suburban church in which the focus was almost entirely on the personal discipleship and spiritual growth of the members. He remarked that while STF by no means neglects the inward spiritual journey of its members, it is constantly pushing the attention of members from “self” to “neighbor.” The concrete expression of this outward impulse is demonstrated in STF’s launching of numerous programs and ministries to meet particular concrete needs within the community, such as Ayuda Community Center and Hunting Park Christian Academy. Over the years, STF has functioned as a “sending base” for various catalytic local initiatives, as members grasp the vision of the church and take up the call to serve the neighborhood with their own distinct abilities and passions, from law and education, to real estate and bicycle repair. In the last few years, STF has launched nine additional church plants in

[203] Baker, *ibid.*

other neighborhoods around Philadelphia, all of which reflect the community in which they are positioned. "Community Church" is clearly a commodious phrase that has a dialectical meaning for STF, signaling its operative theology that the church is both a community of grace which constitutes the congregation as a spiritual family, and also that the church is a sent people propelled to serve and transform the neighborhood and context in which it is located.

Of the three congregations we have examined, STF seems to embrace the Reformed Tradition the most self-consciously, at least among the leaders. Like the other two churches, many members of the church have little background in the Reformed faith or even an awareness that STF is within a Reformed denomination (CRC). But the leaders readily refer to the Reformed tradition and theology, as evidenced already by some of the theological descriptions above. Nevertheless, the Reformed faith is invoked less as a system of doctrine to be believed and more as an approach to spirituality that is to be lived. Pastor Ortiz especially acknowledges that the way Reformed theology is typically carried out consistently confuses the beauty of the theology with its cultural forms. He recounts an experience in which a well-known professor from Westminster Theological Seminary attended a Sunday service at STF. Clearly disturbed and flustered after the service, the Professor remarked to Pastor Ortiz, "This church is not Reformed- it's Pentecostal!" Pastor Ortiz gently explained that the church is deeply Reformed in its theology, but is seeking to contextualize the theology in a disadvantaged, culturally diverse setting in which emotional expression and charismatic forms of worship are germane to the culture. Being "so ethnocentric in your view of the Reformed faith," said Pastor Ortiz, "will kill you."[204]

[204] Ortiz, *ibid.*

In contrast to many of his colleagues at WTS,[205] Pastor Ortiz has sought to approach Reformed theology in a "pastoral way" rather than a "doctrinal way." He sees the tradition as flawed and problematic in its unwillingness to contextualize, but richly valuable in resources for urban ministry and congregational development. "I've always felt that [Reformed theology] is the most functional theology for our cities of today," he says.[206] Strikingly, in his preaching and teaching Pastor Ortiz utilizes Reformed theology in a way that subverts many of his own tradition's most infamous stereotypes, counteracting many of the impediments that minority Reformed leaders cited as the Reformed tradition's most significant limitations in adapting to a diverse context. Two examples suffice. First, Pastor Ortiz notes that "Reformed faith allows us to be confessional, to repent, to acknowledge the ways we are deeply sinful and yet deeply loved by God. We are reminded that we are capable of biases and sexism and racism. Reformed faith brings that out because we depend and rely on grace so much."[207] Ortiz and other leaders at STF have claimed the radical notion of sin, so critical to Reformed soteriology, as a theological resource to critique the very tradition from which it springs. Furthermore, this acknowledgement of radical depravity and the need for grace becomes a missionary tool in the hands of these urban leaders, welcoming all kinds of people into a new diverse spiritual family.

Another example relates to Ortiz's notion of "theological hospitality."[208] Because of his deep convictions in the sovereignty of God, Ortiz believes that we are propelled to recognize the work of God in diverse theological and denominational traditions beyond the Reformed fold, and even learn from them. He recounts a story of visiting a church member sick in hospital. A Pentecostal pastor was also there, a relative of the patient. As Ortiz listened to the fellow pastor

[205] At the time of my site visit, Pastor Ortiz continued to function as an adjunct professor at WTS.
[206] Ortiz, *ibid.*
[207] *Ibid.*
[208] *Ibid.*

pray a fervent prayer for healing, he realized that this pastor actually believed that God was in control of the illness and the hospital institution itself, and though he most likely could not articulate a Westminster-standard doctrine of the sovereignty of God, his prayers and practices demonstrated he believed it on an operative level more than Ortiz did on a cerebral one. This was an eye-opening moment for him, realizing that to accept and incorporate diverse traditions within his church was not a compromise of Reformed theology (as many of his WTS colleagues accused), but a fulfillment of one of his most basic Reformed beliefs in the freedom of God. Like the other multiethnic churches we examined, STF does not limit itself to its normative denominational tradition, but in STF's case at least, this "theological hospitality" is itself articulated as a Reformed conviction. The congregation's normative theology is not necessarily seen in conflict with its espoused and operant theologies, but is rather taken up into the church's theological imaginary and adapted for its mission.

Summary and Conclusion

Our journey into the life of three congregations has opened up a rich deposit of lived theologies, expressed in the espoused theologies of the congregations' descriptions of self-identity, and also in the operant theologies manifested in their ecclesial practices. At times these local theologies have come into conflict with their normative theologies, and in other cases a harmonious dialectic occurs when those theologies interpenetrate and mutually contribute to one another. Although the three congregations are very different, some common theological themes nevertheless emerge that help build one side of the conversation toward a constructive ecclesiology for churches seeking to bear innovative and apostolic witness to the gospel in diverse cultural contexts.

A Covenantal Ecclesiology

All three congregations we have examined communicate explicitly and implicitly a vision of the church as covenant community or spiritual family. At New City Fellowship (NCF), images of "family" and "home" are used extensively to describe the identity of the congregation. At Church of All Nations (CAN), "kinship" is the metaphor frequently employed by Pastor Jin and others, building on an East Asian theology of hospitality. At Spirit and Truth Fellowship (STF), members and leaders alike use the phrase "community church" to describe the nature of STF, a descriptor of its outward-focused orientation but also a depiction of the church's "grace-saturated" internal life together. For multicultural churches like these, "family" is a powerful theological metaphor because there are fewer sociological factors in such churches that would naturally bring the congregations together. As NCF Pastor Kevin Smith stated, "These [family] images really help the multiethnic church understand what it means to come together in a really beautiful way."[209] For churches consisting of diverse people who would otherwise not be in relationships with one another, it is necessary that the "bloodlines" of the spiritual family trump the bloodlines of biology. This is especially necessary when cultural differences create internal conflict within the congregations, and a theological motivation is required for congregations to endure despite the pain of cultural misunderstanding and division.

Additionally, the fact of the congregations' diversity led the leaders of each church to draw out a dimension of its normative theology and "re-frame" it as a resource for community perseverance. At NCF, several leaders spoke of "Covenant Theology," yet applied that theology directly to the inclusive nature of the new spiritual family in Christ. At CAN, Pastor Jin spoke

[209] Smith, *ibid.*

about the way the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God lays a claim on the local church to have responsibility and inclusion for every different kind of people group in a church's reach. At STF, the classic Reformed doctrine of *sola gratia* was re-tuned as a leveling force that forms the church into a community of radical hospitality. In each of the churches, the bedrock commitment to church as *community* not only empowered their missions as multicultural congregations, but also opened up ways of employing traditional Reformed doctrines in innovative ways.

An Eschatological Ecclesiology

Each of the three churches in various degrees also draws on the metaphor of church as an eschatological reality of the diverse Kingdom of God. At NCF, the name of the church itself ("New City") continuously reminds the congregation that the church is called to be a "taste of what's to come" and to preview "what heaven will be like." Similarly, members of STF frequently describe Sunday mornings in worship there as "reflecting the Kingdom of God."[210] Most explicitly, CAN's mission statement articulates the bold theological affirmation, "The church is the provisional reality of the in-breaking of God's reign between Pentecost and the coming kingdom." Each of these churches, though Reformed, tend not to look "backwards" to take their cues from pure forms of ecclesial faithfulness in the past. Instead, they tend to look "sideways" at the context surrounding their church, and then "forward" to see how the future Kingdom of God might be expressed in their local context. In this way, the lived ecclesiology of these churches is a clear rejection of what Nicholas Healy called "blueprint ecclesiologies," a model of a pure form of the church from the past or from some transcendent ideal vision of the church.[211] Instead, these churches practice a "foretaste ecclesiology," surveying their local

[210] Frank, *ibid.*
[211] See Chapter 2 for an explanation of Healy's model.

contexts and then seeking to practice faithful improvisation as a witness to the future Kingdom of God. Whereas in "blueprint ecclesiology" change or adaptation in the church's practices can be seen as a distortion of the church's true essence, these churches envision cultural and contextual adaptation as a sign of missionary faithfulness to their apostolic calling.

A Transformationist Ecclesiology

Each of the three churches in different ways sees the mission of the congregation to be oriented toward the transformation of social reality. Ironically, though all three churches are marked by multiculturalism, none of the three named diversity as an end in itself. For NCF, the gospel itself is described as a capacious message of good news, which has social and economic implications on race relations and forms of social injustice. At CAN, the *telos* of multicultural churches is to "offer hope" of reconciliation in the face of a racist and divided culture. And at STF, the church bears a strong centrifugal impulse toward the healing of its neighborhood. "We didn't come to plant a multiethnic church," said Sue Baker. "What we do is plant churches to reach communities, whatever that community is." It's clear that whether the church is drawing intentionally from a Kuyperian transformationist theology, such as NCF, or through years of community development ministry that explicitly spurns the "sacred/secular" divide, such as STF, these churches have rejected a dualistic vision of salvation, so common to some of the Reformed churches and theologians we examined in Chapter 1. There is no vision of sequestering the gospel to the quiet compartment of the soul in these churches. A "big gospel" is preached, one that has the power to reconcile races, transform communities, and combat imperialism. The church, in turn, is seen as a bearer of that message and a vehicle of its transformative power.

A Generous Ecclesiology

Finally, these three churches express a generous ecclesiology that sees beyond their own normative traditions. The churches are more intent on faithfully carrying out their mission rather than remaining faithful to a normative theological identity. None of the churches is constituted by people from Reformed backgrounds; indeed, the majority of the members of these congregations would not even consider themselves Reformed. Each of the congregations carries an ambivalence, and sometimes outright resistance, to its denominational home. Two significant things seem to happen as a result of this.

First, the nature of the churches' missions and the people whom the church seeks to reach creates a generous theological space for the incorporation of new voices. NCF draws from black church traditions and theology. CAN incorporates Native American spirituality and Anabaptist counter-formational practices. STF gladly welcomes Pentecostal and Charismatic expressions and looks for ways to incorporate new cultural forms as gifts to the church. This creates in these churches a "theological hospitality" in these churches, as Pastor Ortiz put it, which makes space for fresh perspectives.

Second, this generous space given to new voices then in turn seems to renew the churches' own experience of their normative traditions. As described above, the practice of cross-cultural community has helped NCF critique its own conservative denomination but also re-interpret what covenant theology means. CAN has framed a new meaning for "priesthood of all believers" that implements the doctrine to make space for individuals of diverse cultures to have a voice. At STF, Pastor Ortiz found a surprising lesson about the sovereignty of God from an unlikely Pentecostal prayer. Interestingly, the normative theologies of these congregations

helped to develop their local theologies, yet in turn the local theologies of these congregations are also helping them recover aspects of their traditions that have been neglected or critique aspects of their traditions that have been distorted. This is akin to the dialectic dynamic that Robert Schreiter describes, in which "[t]he experience of local communities can…remind us of the fallibility of parts of the tradition,"[212] and also serve to renew them.

We are building a constructive approach toward a fresh ecclesiology to empower churches to bear faithful witness in multicultural contexts. How do the local theologies of these multi-ethnic congregations continue this dialogical process as they come into conversation with more formal theologies of the church? That is the question we turn to next.

[212] Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 35.

CHAPTER 4: DEEPENING THE CONVERSATION

Thus far we have noted the serious vulnerabilities within the Reformed tradition that make it resistant to diverse cultural adaptations (chapter 1), and we have seen real congregations wrestle with those vulnerabilities and find their own ways of adapting for mission in diverse environments (chapter 3). Now we want to turn to the formal theologies of Reformed thinkers, and consider how some seminal reflections on the nature of the church can contribute to the renewal of theology and practice for the church in a diverse context. While the Reformed tradition has limitations, and of course does not bear comprehensive answers, it nevertheless carries significant theological resources that can empower the future church for its mission in increasingly diversifying societies.

The three theologians I've chosen to engage with are Lesslie Newbigin, Allan Boesak, and Colin Gunton, all 20th century theologians. The reasons I have chosen these particular theologians are: First, they are all self-consciously Reformed theologians and carried out their academic work within that theological tradition. Second, each of them specifically addressed the theology of the church and made intentional contributions to the subject of ecclesiology. Third, each of them did their theological work in expressed conversation with the declining dominance of European culture and Christendom in the West, the growing reality of secularism, the influx of cultural plurality, and the racial and cultural tensions at play in Western culture. They were each keen to explore what it means for the church to be the church in the context of spiritual and cultural marginalization, and how the church might carry out its mission in this new late-modern environment. Finally, all of them were not only academics but also practitioners, with at least some involvement in the leadership of the church in their time.

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN AND THE CHURCH AS FORETASTE, SIGN AND INSTRUMENT

Some of the most notable theological work in ecclesiology in recent times has been catalyzed by theologians and practitioners of mission. Jurgen Moltmann wrote over 40 years ago, "Today one of the strongest impulses towards the renewal of the theological concept of the church comes from the theology of mission."[213] Much of Western ecclesiology was forged in the context of a Christianized culture, or "Christendom," in which assumptions about truth, morality and the meaning of life were generally shared between the church and the broader society. In such a context, the church was not a missionary agent to society, but rather its "chaplain."[214] But as Christendom has rapidly eroded over the last 150 years in the West, there has been a growing body of work that reformulates the theology of the church in light of its reclaimed identity as a missionary community to secular Western society. One of the great progenitors of this movement is the late Lessie Newbigin.

Lesslie Newbigin was born and raised in Northumbria, England. Though raised in a Christian family, he came to a living faith during his Cambridge University years through the campus ministry of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). After University, he assumed the post of SCM secretary at the University of Glasgow. He later returned to Cambridge as a theological student, and in 1936 he was ordained as a minister in the Church of Scotland. At once he and his wife Helen were commissioned by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to serve as foreign missionaries in India. Newbigin served as a district missionary in

[213] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 7.
[214] See Darrell Guder, ed., *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998), 48-55.

Kanchipuram from 1939-1947, and as bishop in the Church of South India from 1947-1959. In his later years he continued his ministry as a pastor in the UK.[215]

Newbigin quickly grew to see the importance of the church through his missionary vocation and his engagement with the global ecumenical movement. As early as 1942, we can see Newbigin growing in his conviction about the centrality of the church and formulating his understanding of the church's place and meaning. In his small book *Sin and Salvation*, written as an introduction to Christianity for church workers and village teachers, Newbigin was already self-consciously rethinking the place of the church in the order of salvation. He wrote in the preface to this book:

> When I came to write that chapter [How does salvation become ours?] I found that I had to make a decision about the order of the sections. In the tradition in which I was brought up it would be normal to begin with a section on "faith" and work through to a (probably brief) concluding section on the Church. After a good deal of reflection I decided to reverse the order…there seemed to me to be two good reasons for the order I have adopted. Firstly, it is the order which the reader of the New Testament finds himself following: the Acts of the Apostles come before the Epistles – the fact of the Church before the clue to its inner life. Secondly, it is the order which the non-Christian has to follow when he comes to Christ. What he sees is a visible congregation in his village. It is that congregation which holds out to him the offer of salvation. Only when he has come within its fellowship does he (usually) come to any deep understanding of its inner source.[216]

This paragraph is a prescient reflection on what became emblematic in Newbigin's ecclesiological work. His practical engagement as a pastor, missionary and ecumenist brought him into dialogue with his own tradition, leading him to reformulate his thinking in light of his practice. For our purposes here, it is notable to recognize the ways Newbigin came to appropriate his own Reformed heritage in light of his missionary context, to see how such appropriation

[215] Biographical information accessed from Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).
[216] Lesslie Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation* (London: SCM, 1956), 8-9.

affected his ecclesiology, and then seek to learn from it as we formulate our own fresh ecclesiology for diverse cultural contexts.

Newbigin's Critical Interaction with Reformed Ecclesiology

One of Newbigin's earliest conversations with and critiques of his own Reformed tradition come in his first book explicitly addressing ecclesiology, *The Household of God* (1953), originally delivered as the Kerr Lectures in Glasgow in 1952. Newbigin's ambition in this book is to reformulate the doctrine of the church in light of the breakdown of Christendom, the new missionary situation of the Western church, and the experience of the global church in mission all over the world. In many ways, the book represents Newbgin's own theological awakening to a missionary ecclesiology in light of his experience as a missionary and ecumenist.

The first three chapters of the book are a critical examination of three dominant theological traditions and their doctrine of the church: Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal, respectively.[217] In his chapter on Protestant ecclesiology, he honors the heritage of the Protestant Reformed tradition, grounding the identity of the church in the primacy of faith alone in the events of the gospel, the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Like any good Reformed theologian, to the question, "How is God presented to our faith?" Newbigin answers, "In Jesus Christ. There is one mediator, given once for all, at the center of world history, by whom we are reconciled to God."[218] This faith in the gospel is the grounds for all personal salvation but also is "the constitutive fact of membership in the people of God."[219] In the Protestant Reformed tradition, this object of faith for the people of God is presented in the

[217] Newbigin acknowledges the omission of Orthodox ecclesiology, citing his own ignorance of the tradition. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 10.
[218] *Ibid.,* 49.
[219] *Ibid.,* 45.

two classic marks of the church in Reformed ecclesiology, the faithful preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the sacraments. Newbigin praises the Reformers for this "intensely dynamic conception of the Church,"[220] which takes seriously that Jesus Christ is the ever-present living Lord, continuously acting, creating and re-creating his people through the events of the Word and Sacrament. Yet, Newbigin goes on, the great defect of this conception of the church "is that it gives no real place to the continuing life of the Church as one fellowship binding the generations together in Christ."[221] It conceives the church as a series of separated spiritual events, rather than as a living, social-historic community in an actual place and time. "The Church….is not constituted by a series of disconnected human responses to the supernatural acts of divine grace in the word and sacraments. It is the continuing life of Christ among men in a body which grows by the addition of new members but is itself essentially continuous and visible."[222] Newbigin insists that the church is more than just a collection of sporadic personal responses to salvific grace; grace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, creates a new community, a socio-historic entity that is the visible witness to Jesus Christ in every time and place.

This emphasis on the "visible" church becomes a vital theme within Newbigin's ecclesiology that he develops for nearly the next forty years, and is at the root of his critique of the Reformed conception of church. Newbigin's long-sustained engagement with and reformulation of the Reformed doctrine of election is the archetype of this critique. Newbigin cites two major problems with the doctrine of election as it is typically conceived and applied. First, it prioritizes the invisible, spiritual people of God rather than the visible, local

[220] *Ibid.,* 50.
[221] *Ibid.*
[222] *Ibid., 77.*

congregation. Newbigin writes that when "this truth [of election] is taken out of its proper relation to the truth of the incarnation, the result has been a complete distortion of the gospel. We know this has in fact happened in the history of Calvinism."[223] Rather than emphasize the real, actual local congregation as the place of Christ's activity, election often turns the focus to "the invisible number of the elect known only to God."[224] As we will see below, Newbigin sees the life, relationships, activity, and witness of the visible local congregation as the absolute heart of the church's calling, and he believes that through its preoccupation with the secret, hidden counsel of God, Calvinism has diminished and even distorted the Biblical conception of the local congregation and its local, visible witness. Any disconnection between the "real" and "ideal" church, or "invisible" and "visible" church, strips the local congregation of its power for witness.

Newbigin's second critique of election involves the *purpose* of election- what is God's election *for*? As historically conceived and applied, the Reformed doctrine of election is highly individualistic – which individuals are the chosen and which are not? – and constitutive of privilege – I am saved while others are damned. In response to this, Newbigin appropriates the doctrine of election to be corporate – more about the community than the individual – and constitutive of responsibility – as one chosen, it is now my responsibility to bear witness to Jesus Christ for the sake of others. Newbigin writes, "The principle of election is the only principle congruous with the nature of God's redemptive purpose."[225] Just as God himself is a community of persons, and just as the triune God enacted salvation inter-personally through the incarnation, death and resurrection of the God-man Jesus Christ, so God has created humanity to function interpersonally and interdependently both in life and salvation. In contrast to both Western and

[223] *Ibid.,* 102.
[224] *Ibid.*
[225] *Ibid.,* 101.

Eastern views which see the human person as an autonomous individual in relationship with the divine, the Bible sees all of human life in terms of relationships. There can be, therefore, no private salvation which does not involve another human being. God's salvation does not come straight down to each of us from heaven as through a skylight, to use one of Newbigin's favorite metaphors, but rather comes to us through the neighbor or friend as God's chosen vessel. "There is no salvation except one in which we are saved together through the one who God sends to be the bearer of his salvation."[226]

Thus election is not election to exclusive privilege but to common responsibility, a calling to bear witness to Jesus Christ for the sake of all. Newbigin chastises those Reformed believers who have forgotten the "missionary character of the doctrine of election," occupied with probing backwards from their election into the secret counsel of God, rather than pressing forward to be Christ's ambassadors to the ends of the earth. "We are chosen in order to be sent."[227] Election guarantees that within and throughout history there is brought into being visible, local fellowships that bear the responsibility to bear witness to the gospel to their neighbors and communities, fulfilling God's desires that all people of all nations are eventually brought into his community of grace. "To be elect in Jesus Christ, and there is no other election, means to be incorporated into his mission to the world, to be the bearer of God's saving purpose for this whole world, to be the sign and the agent and the firstfruit of his blessed kingdom which is for all."[228] It is not up to the Christian community to probe the mystery of their own chosenness; it is their responsibility to understand the purpose of their election, to grasp their connection to the whole community, and to fulfill their calling to witness.

[226] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 83.
[227] Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 101.
[228] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 86-87.

Thus Newbigin takes the classic Reformed concept of election, a doctrine often taken to be responsible for internalizing the Christian faith and provoking the withdrawal of congregations from their missionary charge, and he employs it as a powerful resource for local congregations to claim their vocation as witnessing communities and their responsibility to their local neighborhoods. This is a striking demonstration of what Wolterstorff calls an "appropriation" of one's own tradition for the context and calling at hand.

Church as Eschatological Sign, Instrument and Foretaste

Newbigin's repurposing of his Reformed heritage contributes towards a positive construction of a fresh missionary ecclesiology. Beginning with *The Household of God*, a significant mark of Newbigin's ecclesiological reflections is his focus on the church's eschatological identity. His most characteristic description of the church is that the church is the sign, foretaste and instrument of the Kingdom of God.[229] The church is the sign, pointing people to the Kingdom of God. The church is the foretaste or firstfruit of the coming Kingdom. The church is the instrument or agent that God uses to bear witness to his Kingdom in the world. This description of the church becomes so commonplace for Newbigin that it can be found throughout nearly all of his writings. As Newbigin states in his introduction to the Kerr Lectures, "The nature of the Church is never to be finally defined in static terms, but only in terms of that to which it is going. It cannot be understood rightly except in a perspective which is at once missionary and eschatological."[230] Newbigin posits that God has acted definitively in Jesus Christ to reveal and accomplish the end of history, and now in the current "overlap of the ages"

[229] So claims Michael W. Goheen, *As the Father Has Sent Me, I am Sending You: J.E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2000), 32.
[230] Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 25.

the church is the eschatological witness to the present and future Kingdom. Each of these images (foretaste, sign and instrument) build on Newbigin's repurposing of Reformed ecclesiology and intersect with themes of cultural plurality, as seen below.

First, Newbigin describes the church as a foretaste of the Kingdom. The church is the first-fruit, or *arrabon* (deposit) of the coming Kingdom of God. It is not just proclaiming the good news of a coming day of victory; it is indeed a real and present taste of the Kingdom in the midst of the current age. The Holy Spirit is the eschatological gift that brings the power of the coming age into the present moment of history. The sphere of operation for that gift is the church. As such "the sphere of salvation should be a visible fellowship marked by visible signs wherein God uses material means to convey His saving power, and wherein, therefore, there is an earnest and foretaste of the restoration of creation to its true harmony in and for God's glory, and of man to his true relation to the created world."[231] We see here again Newbigin's emphasis on the "visibility" of the church, because if the church is indeed an expression of the future Kingdom in the present age (and not just an episodic spiritual event in response to preaching and sacraments), it must have a concrete socio-historic expression that demonstrates the reality of the Kingdom in living form. As God acts in the power of the Spirit within the church, doing mighty works, drawing men and women to Christ, creating signs of the new age, the Church bears witness to the goal of history towards which everything moves.

Newbigin's reflections on church as foretaste also relate to his convictions about the doctrine of election. God chooses men and women and constitutes them as his church in order to be a foretaste of the restoration of humanity to God, to one another, and to creation. Newbigin often speaks of the church as "the provisional incorporation of all humanity" into the Kingdom

[231] Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 65.

of God. It is the "first-fruits…of God's gracious election, for His purpose is precisely the re-creation of the human race in Christ."[232] If the future Kingdom is one in which the people of every tribe, tongue and nation are represented, then that future salvation "must be communicated in and by the actual development of a community which embodies – if only in foretaste – the restored harmony of which is speaks. A gospel of reconciliation can only be communicated by a reconciled fellowship."[233] Thus the diverse and reconciled relationships within the church are both a product (first-fruit) of the gospel and also the vessel of witness for the future Kingdom. It is by election that the diverse people are gathered within a common fellowship, and it is by way of election that God's mission continues, as the community extends the good news of the gospel to more and different kinds of people in its neighboring communities and even to the ends of the earth. Newbigin writes, "An essential part of the history of salvation is the history of the bringing into obedience to Christ of the rich multiplicity of ethical, cultural, and spiritual treasures that God has lavished on humankind…All these gifts will be truly received and understood when the Holy Spirit takes them and declares their true meaning and use to the church."[234] In the words of George Hunsberger, for Newbigin cultural diversity is "a beginning harbinger and firstfruit of redemption which in its captivity to Christ and use by the Holy Spirit manifests God's glory."[235] Thus the richness of diverse fellowship and cultural reconciliation within local congregations is one facet of the Church's central identity as eschatological foretaste of the coming Kingdom.

Very similar themes emerge when Newbigin speaks of the church as a "sign" pointing to the Kingdom, and here he is even more explicit about the church's call to manifest diverse

[232] Ibid., 103.
[233] Ibid., 141.
[234] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 178-179.
[235] George Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality (Eerdmans, 1998), 253.

community as a witness of the coming age. The church can be a sign because it is a "visible community among other human communities,"[236] a concrete socio-historical fact in space and time, not just an episodic spiritual event. This new community is possible because of the finished work of Christ. "By the deed wrought once for all on Calvary, there is accomplished an atonement so deep and all-embracing, that the deepest divisions between men are transcended, and a body is created in which men of every sort and kind are drawn together."[237] Now as a first-fruit of that atoning work, the church also points beyond itself to the ultimate reconciliation of all things. This includes "the unity of humankind," the restoration of the many-cultured human community to live under God's reign. The church thus as a sign is "humanity in every place re-created in Christ,"[238] a display of the "many-splendored wisdom of God,"[239] and "a home for people of all nations and a sign of the unity of all."[240] The church is called to manifest in its relationships and unity the resulting power of Christ's atoning work while also pointing to the climactic unity of all humankind at the last age.

Even writing in the mid 20th century, Newbigin wrote presciently about the emergence of complex, multicultural and pluralistic societies, shifting under the massive trends of migration and globalization. In a paper written for the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches in 1958, on the eve of their integration, Newbigin spoke of the fact that "The development of a complex society which brings men into intimate relationship with people in all parts of the world involves a great enlargement of the concept of neighborhood."[241] A few

[236] Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 26.
[237] Lesslie Newbigin, *Is Christ Divided?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 7. Newbigin speaks of the church most often as a sign of the future Kingdom, but occasionally he also speaks of the church as a sign of the past event of the atonement, as he does here. "The Church is…both the fruit and the sign of God's atoning work."
[238] *Ibid.,* 21.
[239] Newbigin, *Is Christ Divided?*, 7.
[240] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 124.
[241] Lesslie Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (London: Wm. Carling and Co., Ltd.: 1958), 23.

years later he wrote that "We are very familiar with the fact that the world has become in our day one neighborhood…The world has been shrunk to the dimensions of a village. The old separation of cultures has been broken down, and all nations and cultures are crowded together in closer and closer contact."[242] Yet Newbigin understood that the fact of cultural pluriformity within a common society is not worth celebrating on its own; indeed, the reality only exacerbates the tensions and conflicts that divide humankind. "Propinquity is not unity."[243] The fact of diverse people living in proximity together creates more of a problem than a reality worth commending. So the question, "How can we live in unity?" has become a question of utmost importance in our time. Newbigin insists that "there is no place at which mankind can receive the gift of unity except the mercy seat which God has provided. We can only be made one at the point where our sins are forgiven… Only He who is lifted up from the earth can fulfill the promise to draw all men to himself."[244] God has extended rich grace to humanity through Jesus Christ, but it is not enough for the church simply to enjoy the gift of mercy. The church must now live as "the body that contains all sorts and conditions of men…the home for the whole human race…it is the one place where every human distinction is transcended and where mankind is restored to its proper character as one family."[245] The local congregation must live as the fruit of Christ's reconciling work, and through the diverse constitution of its membership, act as a sign pointing to the reconciliation of all people under God's reign.

Because of his conviction that the church is called to be a sign of the unity of humanity, Newbigin saved some of his most biting criticism for congregational and denominational disunity. He was an architect of a movement to create a united church in South India, and he was

[242] Newbigin, *Is Christ Divided?,* 8, 24.
[243] *Ibid*., 8.
[244] *Ibid., 9.*
[245] *Ibid.,* 12.

a dogged critic of denominationalism on the ecumenical stage. Newbigin often noted that in the context of Christendom, congregations of different denominational associations competed alongside one another for members, money and reputation, occupied themselves with preserving their own distinctive traditions, and defined themselves over and against each other rather than in the light of the responsibility they have toward their neighbor and community.[246] Yet the more the church finds itself in a missionary context, the more foolish and unfaithful such practices of the Christendom church appear. The missionary church understands that it must stand in a common place or neighborhood as a new united humanity bearing witness to the gospel, not fractured into competing social and theological tribes. The church must include within itself all varieties of people from different backgrounds, castes, education, races and classes. In the light of our diverse missionary moment, the church "either visibly disintegrates into warring factions, or else it stands before men as a society constituted by nothing else than its relation to God through Christ, facing fallen humanity not as a series of particular associations but simply as humanity restored to itself in Christ."[247] Therefore the divisions of the church, whether denominational or cultural or economic, are nothing less than a failure to embody the truth of the gospel. "Our divisions are a public contradiction of [the] atonement."[248] The church cannot faithfully act as a sign of the unity of humanity without acting as a provisional demonstration of that unity in the here and now. "Into what are we inviting the men of the nations – into a new complex of divisions in place of their own, or into the one family where at last they may know themselves one in the Father's house? We cannot stand together before men in the highways of the world and ask them to give up everything in order to be reconciled with God through Jesus

[246] See Goheen, 202.
[247] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defense of the South India Scheme* (London: SCM, 1948), 17.
[248] Newbigin, *One Body,* 54.

Christ, if we do not face the question of our own lack of reconciliation."[249] The church can only point to the ultimate reconciliation of all things when the local congregation is itself living as a community of reconciliation among the collection of diverse people in a common place.

Lastly, Newbigin speaks of the church not only as a foretaste and sign of the Kingdom, but also as an instrument. He is careful to describe the church as "an" instrument (rather than "the" instrument), acknowledging that God is free to work and operate in and through diverse agents to carry out his purposes in the world. He speaks most reservedly about the church as instrument, often noting that "The church is not so much the agent of mission as the locus of mission."[250] Nevertheless, Newbigin affirms that the church is the place where the powers of the Kingdom are available and efficacious. "A local congregation of Christ's people is not…a 'branch' of the church, deriving its authority from the larger body; it is the local manifestation of Christ's presence and instrument of his mission," Newbigin writes.[251] A local congregation, living as a first-fruit of the atoning work of Christ and pointing as a sign to the coming age, can also act in the power of the Spirit for the sake of its local community as it manifests the love of the kingdom, pursues justice, and extends mercy. It also acts as the instrument of Christ's promise to unite all humanity. As a local congregation repents of its tribalism, prejudices and divisions, engages the diverse people in its neighborhood and context, and invites them into the community of grace, "[Christ] will surely use us to fulfill His purpose of drawing all men to Himself."[252]

[249] *Ibid,* 54-55.
[250] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 119.
[251] Newbigin, *One Body,* 49.
[252] Newbigin, *Is Christ Divided?*, 9.

The Local Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel

In one of Newbigin's final works before his death, he asks the question, "What could it mean for the Church to make once again the claim which it made in its earliest centuries, the claim to provide the public truth by which society can be given coherence and direction?"[253] This question is germane to the topic we are exploring here, as we seek to develop a fresh ecclesiology for churches bearing witness to the gospel in multicultural environments. What does it mean for such churches to proclaim public truth for the world?

Newbigin's answer is not rhetoric, coercion or apologetics, but is the local congregation. In a society marked by the cynicism of the specter of Christendom's shadow, disintegrating under the incoherence of an uncentered pluriformity, "the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."[254] The gospel is not an idea; it is an incarnated Lord who acted definitely in history. As such, the gospel gains integrity not through disembodied argumentation but through a concrete, visible community which brings material credibility to its truth. As Newbigin often reminded, Jesus did not write a book but formed a community, "a visible community…, a community… recreated in [Christ] to make explicitly who He is and what He has done."[255] This is what Newbigin means by the local congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel, and it comports with Newbigin's vision of the church as a sign, foretaste and instrument of the gospel, as described above. The local congregation must be "in its own life an enacted interpretation of and witness to the good news that in Christ God is making all things new."[256] God has broken into history and has triumphed

[253] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 223.
[254] *Ibid.*, 227.
[255] Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 27. See also Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society,* 227.
[256] Murray Rae, "The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel," in Mark B. Laing and Paul Weston, eds., *Theology in Missionary Perspective: Lesslie Newbigin's Legacy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 190.

over sin and death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, launching his renovating Kingdom power into the world to re-shape all things. This "re-shaping" power must now be most apparent in and through the church, the people of God who participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. The cosmic claims of the gospel "will not be credible claims unless the reordering of things to which these claims testify is somewhere visible. It cannot become visible in a series of claims, or in a written deposit. These are *mere* words. It becomes visible only in and through the formation of a differently ordered community."[257]

Influenced by philosopher of science Michael Polyani, Newbigin believed that "there is no rationality except a socially embodied rationality."[258] Along with Alystair MacIntyre, Newbigin critiques the Western illusion that there is any kind of truth or rationality that exists apart from an embodied society. Therefore any claim on reality must be an embodied claim, one that is manifested in a particular community. For this reason, in his apologetic book *Truth to Tell*, Newbigin concludes the book by claiming "the most important contribution the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order."[259] Into a world of warring worldviews, into a world of many nations and languages, into societies that now are constituted by peoples and cultures from across the globe, God has deposited his church as the foretaste and sign of his Kingdom. "In a world that is now knit together into a single global city, the Church must be visible and recognizable as the community that embraces the whole city in the Father's love."[260] The most powerful act the church can perform in bearing witness to the gospel and the Kingdom is to itself live as a new social order, a new humanity, a reconciled people, the first

[257] Rae, 193.
[258] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 87.*
[259] Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 85.
[260] *Ibid., 90.*

foretaste of a new creation in which God reconciles all things. The community itself is the most credible hermeneutic of the gospel in every time and place.

Summary

Lesslie Newbigin's missionary theology of the church is an important contribution to a Reformed ecclesiology for churches in multicultural contexts. Appreciative of his Reformed heritage yet constructively critical, Newbigin repurposes covenantal and election theology as a foundation for building his doctrine of the church which is both missionary and eschatological. As missionary, the church has responsibility for all those in its local community and even to the ends of the earth, having been chosen as those who are called to bear the gospel to all people. As eschatological, the church is called to act as a foretaste, sign and instrument of the Kingdom that is already present in power yet coming in fullness. For the church in diverse and multicultural environments, this means the local congregation is called to embrace the diversity that is present in its own context not as an end in itself, but so that it can faithfully live as a visible first-fruit of the provisional incorporation into Christ of the human community that God has gathered in that time and place. It is the first glimpse of the "new city" to come, the restoration of humanity to God, one another, and all things.

SECTION 2: ALLAN BOESAK AND THE CHURCH AS INSTRUMENT OF "WORLD FORMATIVE CHRISTIANITY"

Allan Aubrey Boesak is a black South African theologian who serves as the Desmond Tutu Professor for Peace, Global Justice and Reconciliation Studies at Christian Theological Seminary and Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. Beginning in the late 1960s, Boesak served in various pastoral roles in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa.[261] He rose to prominence in the 1980s when he became an outspoken critic of the South African National Party, and he became the primary founder, leader and voice of the United Democratic Front, an organization formed to unite South Africans and to resist apartheid. He was elected as president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982, and remained in that role until 1991.

Boesak is a striking example of a Reformed theologian grappling with his own tradition and employing it innovatively for the mission of the church. As a young theologian, Boesak examined the ways that Western theology has ignored and even contributed to the plight of the poor and oppressed, positing that the Western theological tradition "move[s] through history with a bland kind of innocence, hiding these painful truths behind a façade of myths and real or imagined anxieties."[262] As Boesak grew in influence as a pastoral leader, he began to address the Reformed tradition more specifically. In October 1981, he addressed the first conference of the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa. He spoke frankly of the dark history of the Reformed movement in South Africa, a history racked with contradictions. "The Europeans

[261] The Dutch Reformed Mission Church formed in 1881 by three congregations that separated from the white Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa to form the nucleus of a semiautonomous denomination for people of racially mixed parentage (Coloureds).
[262] Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 3. This book is Boesak's published dissertation from Kampen University.

who claim this land, who scattered and killed its people, did it in the name of a Christian God whom they prayed to as Reformed Christians," Boesak lamented.[263] He enumerated the ways that slavery, dehumanization and violence were enacted and justified through arguments based on Reformed theology. More than any other movement or institution of thought in South Africa, it was the Dutch Reformed Church that gave birth to and animated the ideologies of apartheid. "It is Reformed Christians who have split the church on the basis of race and color, and who now claim that racially divided churches are a true Reformed understanding of the nature of the Christian church."[264] It was Reformed pastors and leaders who devised the theology that fueled apartheid, aligning the gospel with their racist ideologies. "The God of the Reformed tradition was the God of slavery, fear, persecution and death."[265] This history undermined the dignity and credibility of the Reformed tradition in South Africa, such that many came to believe that racism is an inevitable fruit of the Reformed tradition. Boesak stated, "Being Reformed is equated with total, uncritical acceptance of the status quo, sinful silence in the face of human suffering, and manipulation of the Word of God in order to justify oppression."[266] At that moment in the early 1980s, as black South Africans continued to strain against the violent injustice of the apartheid regime sanctioned and upheld by the white Dutch Reformed Church, they were left asking the questions, "What does it mean to be black and Reformed in South Africa today?....Does the Reformed Tradition have a future in South Africa?"[267]

Yet in the face of this history, Boesak insisted that the white Dutch Reformed Church had distorted and defaced the Reformed tradition rather than embodied its true legacy. Boesak

[263] Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 83.
[264] *Ibid., 86.*
[265] *Ibid.*
[266] *Ibid.*
[267] *Ibid.,* 84.

claimed that the theology and practice of the Dutch Reformed Church had become infected by racist and nationalist propaganda and political ideology, and had developed a system of doctrine that was in fact antithetical to the gospel and the Reformed tradition. It is the white Dutch Reformed Christians, he claimed, that have in fact betrayed and maligned their Reformed heritage.

In his seminal address to the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians, Boesak builds his case on several pillars of the Reformed tradition that he states are central to its legacy. First, he invokes the Reformed understanding of the role of government as given by God for the just and legitimate administration of human society. Quoting Calvin and the Scottish Confession at length, Boesak insists that the South African government has betrayed its God-given authority to govern with justice, and therefore South African Christians now have the responsibility to resist its authority. "It is not the perpetrators of injustice, but those who resist it, who are the true representatives of the Reformed tradition."[268]

Second, Boesak denounces the claim that apartheid is Christian on the basis of its abuse of the poor and the perpetuation of oppression, stating that it is the true character of the Reformed tradition to side with the oppressed and to work for social justice. Here he extensively cites Calvin and Abraham Kuyper, building his case that those who currently speak on behalf of the Reformed Tradition in South Africa are actually betraying it. Again he claims, "It is in vain that the oppressive system of apartheid and its defenders claim any Reformed legitimation."[269]

But Boesak's most significant argument, and one that he draws on not just in this address but throughout his extensive career in public ministry, is his insistence that at the heart of the Reformed tradition is a vision of "World-Formative Christianity," a phrase he borrows from his

[268] *Ibid*., 94.
[269] *Ibid.,* 92.

friend and philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff.[270] This vision is grounded in the lordship of Jesus Christ and his reign over every facet of human society, including the socio-political realm. Boesak was fond of quoting Abraham Kuyper's famous phrase, that there is not a single square inch of life that does not fall under Christ's lordship. This truth suggests that, according to Boesak, "All of life is indivisible, just as God is indivisible, and in all of life – personal and public, politics and economics, sports and arts, science and liturgy – the Reformed Christian seeks the lordship of Christ."[271] Boesak claims that it is and has always been at the heart of the true Reformed movement to engage deeply with the sinful powers and structures of our world, and to work for systemic renewal in order to bring more of the social order under the reign of Christ. Reformed Christians are ruthlessly honest about the depraved nature of the social order, recognizing that societies, which human beings build, will always be infected by sin. Yet rather than accepting these broken realities and even institutionalizing them, as Boesak claims the theology of apartheid maintained, "in true Reformed theology…the recognition of the broken, sinful realities of our world becomes the impulse toward reformation and healing."[272] Thus the faithful Reformed Christian sees the lordship of Jesus as a powerful impulse to join the struggle for reform and justice. "For us black Reformed Christians," Boesak eloquently spoke, "that means that in the following of Jesus Christ the spiritual experience is never separated from the liberation struggle."[273] The call to social and political resistance is spiritual work.

[270] Nicholas Wolterstorff is an American philosopher and Reformed theologian who taught for three decades at Calvin College, and at Yale University for the final decade of his career. Wolterstorff and Boesak were deeply aligned in their practical and academic foci in the 1980s and had a profound influence on each other, as outlined below.
[271] *Ibid.,* 88.
[272] *Ibid., 90.*
[273] *Ibid., 89.*

Interlude: Nicholas Wolterstorff, Allan Boesak, and the theological mutuality of a cross-cultural friendship

As mentioned above, Boesak lifted the phrase "World-Formative Christianity" from his friend and American philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff. The friendship was birthed in a visit that Wolterstorff made to South Africa in 1975, when he attended an international conference on Christian higher education in Potchefstroom, South Africa. In this his first visit to the global South, Wolterstorff was confronted with the reality of apartheid, and he heard the cries of the oppressed black Christians against the National Party regime. He was deeply inspired and challenged, and the visit resulted in numerous return journeys to South Africa, and helped direct Wolterstorff's own philosophical turn to the study of justice and the Reformed tradition. Also within this time he formed a friendship with Allan Boesak, who became one of Wolterstorff's dearest friends and influencers.[274]

One of Wolterstorff's most widely known and broadly celebrated set of lectures were the 1981 Kuyper Lectures delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam. The lectures were later adapted into his book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, which Wolterstorff dedicated to "my dear friend Allan Boesak, black Reformed pastor and theologian from South Africa, in whose speech I have heard both the cries of the oppressed and the Word of the Lord."[275] In this set of lectures, Wolterstorff asks the question: "How should the Christian insert himself or herself into the present social order?"[276] Wolterstorff seeks to answer this question of social engagement through the lens of his own personal Reformed and Presbyterian heritage. He carefully chooses

[274] Wolterstorff summaries his first visit to South Africa and developing friendship with Allan Boesak in his memoir, *Journey Toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).
[275] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), dedication page.
[276] *Ibid.,* viii. Though he frames this question around the task of a singular Christian, for most of the book Wolterstorff has in mind the vocation of the Christian community, as will be evident below.

the word "appropriation" to describe his use of the tradition, for "appropriation of one's tradition implies neither uncritical acceptance nor total rejection; it entails a discriminating adaptation of its features to one's own situation."[277] While Wolterstorff's own upbringing within the Reformed tradition left him with no vision for social engagement, Wolterstorff argues cogently that the original Calvinist vision is one of "World-Formative Christianity."

Wolterstorff notes that one of the most significant shifts in the worldview of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century English Puritans was that "saints are responsible for their world." In contrast to the "other-worldly" Medieval mindset that passively accepted the social order while waiting for the ultimate heavenly destiny, the leaders of the early Calvinist movement saw that the present social order bore marks of corruption and sin, while also affirmed that central to the spiritual life is that "the saints are responsible for the structure of the social world in which they find themselves."[278] In such world-formative religion, the individual or congregation seeks to become "an instrument of God,"[279] responding in obedience, motivated by gratitude, to bring the social reality into closer alignment to the will of God. While God designed all humanity to live in an ordered community bound by love of God and neighbor, the fall has corrupted that reality. Now, in obedient gratitude, the elect of God are called "to work for the renewal of human life that it may become what God meant for it to be. They are to struggle to establish a holy commonwealth here on earth."[280]

Wolterstorff asserts that the most comprehensive vision of this holistic approach to Christianity is embodied in the Old Testament concept of *shalom*. Literally translated "peace," shalom is "the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self,

---

[277] *Ibid.,* ix.
[278] *Ibid., 3.*
[279] *Ibid*., 10.
[280] *Ibid., 19.*

with fellows, with nature."[281] Shalom incorporates not only "right relationship" between humanity and God, but also harmonious relationships between fellow human beings and the social and physical order. Because the experience of such harmony involves the embodiment of humanity in a material reality, the enjoyment of one's own inherent rights, given by God, is indispensable to shalom. Citing the injustice of apartheid as an example, in which a state has chosen to exalt the rights of certain citizens above others based on ethnicity, Wolterstorff claims that shalom is wounded when societies fail to carry out their obligations to fulfill God's vision for a just and flourishing community. It becomes therefore the obligation of the spiritual community of Christ to seek shalom as both a cultural and liberation mandate flowing out of the vision of God for a just society. Acknowledging that shalom will only ultimately be fulfilled as an eschatological promise of God envisioned by the prophets, Wolterstorff insists that it is also now the current calling of God's people. He writes:

> Shalom is both God's cause in the world and our human calling. Even though the full incursion of shalom in our history will be divine gift and not merely human achievement, even though its episodic incursion into our lives now also has a dimension of divine gift, nonetheless it is shalom we are to work and struggle for. We are not to stand around, hands folded, waiting for shalom to arrive. We are workers in God's cause, his peace-workers. The missio Dei is *our* mission.[282]

While Newbigin was hesitant about developing the image of church as "instrument," Wolterstorff directly addresses this mandate of the church to be an instrument of shalom in the world. He goes so far as to employ the word "sacrament" to describe the vocation of the church, that in living up to its inner nature the church may become "a sacrament, an effective sign of God's Kingdom of shalom."[283] Rejecting a "gospel of inwardness," the church must never acquiesce to the existing broken social realities or turn away from the brokenness of the social

[281] *Ibid., 69.*
[282] *Ibid., 72.*
[283] *Ibid, 119.*

world around it, but instead must work for its renewal and transformation, resisting injustice and tyranny in order to further God's vision of shalom. Wolterstorff insists that this vision of the church working for the reform of the structure of the social world is inherent to the Reformed tradition, first emerging in original Calvinism, and now embodied in much of the "underside" of the global Christian community.

It is clear that in this frame of time in the early to mid-1980s, the public and academic ministries of Allan Boesak and Nicholas Wolterstorff were closely aligned and mutually edifying. It was Boesak's activism that inspired Wolterstorff's academic project on justice and shalom, and it was Wolterstorff's theological development of the concept of "world-formative Christianity" that shaped Boesak's powerful public ministry and fortified his confidence that his own interpretation of the Reformed tradition was correct.[284] In a striking moment that embodied this partnership, Boesak was arrested in October 1985 for public disturbance and Wolterstorff was called to appear as a witness for the defense. Not only was Wolterstorff asked to testify to Boesak's character and non-violent commitments, he was asked to defend, in response to the government's insistence that ministers of the gospel such as Boesak stick to purely "spiritual" matters and stay out of politics, that "an important strand of the Reformed tradition has always been to refuse to accept any dichotomy between the 'spiritual' and the political."[285] Wolterstorff did testify, but it was Boesak who came to his own defense that his Reformed heritage required his involvement in social and political affairs. Called into the witness box and asked by the state attorney, "Is it true that you think it is appropriate to engage in political activities in addition to your work as a minister?" Boesak answered:

[284] Boesak cites Wolterstorff on numerous occasions in his public addresses, including in his seminal address to the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in October 1981. See *Black and Reformed*, 89.
[285] *Journey Toward Justice,* 143.

> I do not regard my political activities as something in addition to my call as minister of the gospel. I come from a tradition, the Reformed tradition, in which we refuse to separate the political from the spiritual. As Abraham Kuyper said, there is not one square inch of this world that does not belong to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.[286]

Several days later Boesak was released and all charges against him were dropped.

For Wolterstorff, Boesak exemplifies the best of the Reformed tradition, a pastor whose convictions propelled him into the struggle for the embodiment of shalom in the world. In his final chapter of his memoir, Wolterstorff offers a clarion call to Christians to persevere in the calling to seek justice in our broken world. Acknowledging the overwhelming nature of injustice and the temptation to fatigue and burnout, he invites his readers to persist in hope and prayer for a world made right. To do so, he again employs the words of his old friend Allan Boesak, this time lifted from an open letter Boesak wrote in March 2001:

> Our prayers are sometimes political. They must be, because all the world is the Lord's, and there is no area of life, not a single inch, that is not subject to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. So politics and politicians cannot consider themselves outside the demands of the gospel or outside the circle of prayer. We pray for politics, not because we feel much at home there, in that world of intrigue and compromise, of betrayal and awesome responsibility, but because even there we must assume our positions as believers. Even there we must dare to name God, to confess God within the womb of politics, and so challenge every idolatry that seeks to displace God in the lives of God's people. And so we come together to pray for transformation, political and societal and economic; and we pray for personal transformation, for conversion, so that people might be driven by inner conviction rather than by political expediency.[287]

For Boesak and Wolterstorff, a truly Reformed Christian expression is one that faces the evil and systemic sin of our broken societies, and works for a renewed social arrangement that enacts justice for all, especially its most vulnerable citizens.

---

[286] *Ibid.,* 145.
[287] *Ibid.,* 237.

World Formative Christianity and the Belhar Confession

Perhaps the most institutionalized expression of Boesak's interpretation of Reformed Christianity is the writing and codification of the Belhar Confession. The Confession of Belhar was first adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982, and then formally accepted as a fourth confession in 1986. In his address to the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in 1981, Boesak spoke of the need for black Christians in South Africa to formulate a confession for their time and situation. He justified this call for a modern confession based on two serious concerns. First, because the gospel itself was under threat. Karl Barth famously stated that the Reformed confessions are always an articulation of a theological "no" against a danger that threatens to undermine the gospel and the Word of God.[288] The "no" of the Belhar confession is aimed at the doctrine of apartheid, never mentioned in the confession, but clearly implicated as a heresy. "It is important to declare apartheid to be irreconcilable with the gospel of Jesus Christ," Boesak commented in a speech that preceded the writing of Belhar, "a sin that has to be combatted on every level of our lives, a denial of the Reformed tradition, a heresy that is to the everlasting shame of the church of Jesus Christ in the world."[289] The second rationale that Boesak makes for the need of a modern confession is to redeem the Reformed tradition in South Africa. "We should accept our special responsibility," Boesak urges, "to salvage this tradition from the grip of the mighty and the powerful who have so shamelessly perverted it for their own ends, and let it speak once again for God's oppressed and suffering peoples."[290] Boesak believed that a fresh Reformed confession birthed in the conflict of the

[288] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) 631, 630.
[289] *Black and Reformed*, 95.
[290] *Ibid*.

South African struggle could retrieve the true heart of the Reformed movement as a gift to the global church.

In response to Boesak's call, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church wrote and adopted a new confession known as the Confession of Belhar, named after the "coloured" town where the synod was held. Boesak claimed that it was the first confession of faith to be formulated in almost 300 years within the Reformed community of churches, and the first to emerge from a church in Africa in modern times.[291] Authored principally by Boesak, the confession articulates in five articles the historic affirmation of the triune God, while going on to affirm the call of the church to unity, reconciliation and justice. The confession rejects absolutisation of race as sinful separation, and celebrates the diversity that affirms God's design for humanity and welcomes it as a gift for the life of the church. It calls the church to be an instrument and agent of reconciliation within the world, as a witness to the age to come. It exhorts the church to align with the oppressed of the earth, "to stand where God stands," on the side of those who cry for justice. Finally, the confession invites the church to pursue these ends even at risk of persecution and suffering.[292] The confession as a whole is shining example of a Reformed community appropriating its tradition in the midst of an intense social struggle, and Boesak's own commitment to "world-formative Christianity" is clear throughout. Reflecting 25 years later on the confession, Boesak writes that the Belhar Confession expresses a spiritual commitment that "is not locked up in a desire to escape the realities of this world, a privatized, inner experience of God while shutting out the voices of pain. It is the trembling of the soul before God, so that we

[291] Boesak acknowledges the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in 1934 as an additional modern confessional statement from the church, but he claims that the church itself saw this as a theological "declaration" rather than a confession. See "To Stand Where God Stands: Reflections on the Confession of Belhar after 25 Years," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiastecae 34,* no. 1 (July 2008): 143-172.
[292] For the full text of the Belhar Confession, see https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf

are sent out to seek the glory of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life."[293] He continues to perceive the Lordship of Jesus Christ as the engine for the church's engagement in the life of the world.

The Belhar Confession has indeed become a gift to the global Reformed community, adopted by many other Reformed families as a confessional document, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2016. It also significantly influenced the writing of other documents such as the Accra Confession, adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' General Council in Accra, Ghana, in 2004.

Summary

Allan Boesak's ecclesiology was forged not in an academic study but in the trenches of a literal life and death struggle, and the fruit of his work is a vital contribution to the formation of a Reformed ecclesiology for churches in multicultural contexts. Perhaps most striking of all is Boesak's refusal to discard his own Reformed theological heritage, despite the ways it had been violently employed to the destruction and oppression of his people. Though by no means uncritical of the Reformed tradition, Boesak's response was to salvage what he believed to be a truth at the heart of the Reformed tradition, a vision for "world-formative Christianity" that engages the brokenness of the world for the renewal of all things. In addition to his love of Kuyper's "every square inch" quotation, Boesak also spoke often with great affection of the first article of the Heidelberg Catechism.[294] Boesak interpreted this affirmation of Christ's claim on

[293] "To Stand Where God Stands," 19.
[294] "Q1. **What is thy only comfort in life and in death?** A: That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him."

the life of the Christian as not simply a personal comfort for the troubled soul, but as a statement of "revolutionary spirituality without which our being Christian in the world is not complete, and without which the temptations that are part and parcel of the liberation struggle will prove too much for us."[295] Against a totalitarian regime that claimed ultimate authority, the catechism claims the comprehensive and eternal reign of the crucified Lord. For Boesak, this confession of Jesus as Lord is not spiritual escapism; it is a confession with profound implications for the whole of life. It is a confession that outlines the calling and mission of the church, to be an instrument of the shalom of God, naming the limits of human power and pointing to the just reign of Jesus Christ. It is this, Boesak believes, that is the great gift of the Reformed legacy. "This is our tradition, and it is worth fighting for."[296]

For the church in diverse multi-cultural contexts, Boesak's living ecclesiology challenges the church to address social and systemic brokenness in whatever situation it finds itself, to seek the just reign of God, to advocate for the most marginalized members of the community, and to embody unity among a diverse humanity. In doing so, Reformed churches will not capitulate to a spiritualized, other-worldly version of Christianity, but will model a vision of the church that is deeply engaged in the life of the world, and one that welcomes diverse and marginalized people as those central to its calling.

[295] *Ibid.,* 20.
[296] *Black and Reformed*, 99.

SECTION 3: COLIN GUNTON AND THE CHURCH AS AN ECHO OF THE TRIUNE GOD

Colin Gunton was a British Reformed systematic theologian who served as Professor of Christian Doctrine at King's College, London from 1984 until his death in 2003. Gunton is considered to be one of the most distinctive and powerful voices in contemporary British theology, and one of the key sources of the renewal of classical Christian theology as a credible intellectual discipline. His most notable contribution was the defense and creative re-articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, and his animating conviction was that "everything looks different in the light of the Trinity."[297] His work reflected that conviction, as he explored diverse topics ranging as widely from pneumatology to healthcare in the light of Trinitarian doctrine. For our purposes, Gunton made highly creative contributions to ecclesiology, and his work provides generative possibilities in constructing a Reformed theology of the church for mission in ethnically pluralistic contexts.

One other biographical note is worth mentioning before examining Gunton's ecclesiology. Gunton was more than an academic; he was also a servant of the local church. It is not really possible to understand the impulse behind Gunton's work in ecclesiology without recognizing Gunton's personal rootedness in an ordinary congregation seeking to be faithful in a post-Christian context. For nearly three decades Gunton and his family were active members of Brentwood United Reformed Church, and Gunton served in the church as an associate minister for 28 years, regularly preaching there about once a month. He was deeply involved as a leader of the church in the decisions and activities of the congregation. Some of his most intimate and revealing writings are found in two published collections of his sermons, in which his personal

[297] Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 4.

love for and leadership of this local congregation is in view.[298] This fact of Gunton's vocational location within a local church is important, firstly, because Gunton viewed the theological enterprise as one that must never take place in abstraction, but always within the context of the worshipping community. "Systematic Theology is a programme of thought based in the life of the Christian community in worship," he wrote. "It is important to be aware of the fact that there is no thought or culture without a context, and that theology's context is essentially, in however derivative a sense, churchly."[299] There is no hint of docetic or platonic abstraction in Gunton's reflections on the church, for his work is grounded in a living congregation.

Secondly, Gunton's writings disclose his personal passion to see the church rise to its ordained purpose, to display the glory of the Triune God and to incorporate a scattered humanity into the redeemed community. Gunton's writings consistently reveal his struggle to consider the role and calling of the church in a post-Constantinian context. He saw the church in the West, deprived of its once secure social and political status, wrestling now to understand its rightful place in society.[300] Rather that perpetuate a dying institution, Gunton's academic explorations were fueled by his own personal desire "to lift our eyes above the minutiae of institutional and merely ecclesiastical concerns to the Church's true calling, which is, by the praise of God which is both worship and life, to share in the promised reconciliation of all things to him."[301] This is a striking aspiration articulated by a systematic theologian, and one that orients us to the catalytic purpose behind his reflections on the church.

---

[298] Colin Gunton, *Theology Through Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) and Colin Gunton, *The Theologian as Preacher* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007).
[299] *Ibid.,* 4.
[300] As an example, see Colin Gunton, "Election and Ecclesiology n the Post-Constantinian Church", Scottish Journal of Theology, Volume 53, Issue 2, (May 2000), 212-227.
[301] Colin Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 205.

As stated above, Gunton's most notable and celebrated theological contribution was his recovery of a robust Trinitarian doctrine summarized in his phrase, "God is being in communion."[302] Building on the Greek Cappadocian theological tradition and Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizoulas as one of its key modern interpreters, Gunton pressed his conviction that there is no substantive ontological "being" of God apart from the inseparable and indivisible relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "The three persons of the Trinity exist only in reciprocal eternal relatedness. God is not God apart from the way in which Father, Son and Spirit in eternity give to and receive from each other what they essentially are. The three do not coinhere, but dynamically constitute one another's being."[303] Against the Western theological tradition, represented in Augustinian Trinitarian developments, which posited some ineffable "essence" of God existing anterior to the three persons, Gunton maintained that there is no anterior being of God other than the dynamic of the three persons of the Trinity in eternal relation.[304]

What does this have to do with the church? Following his conviction that "theology is required…to come to terms with the universal implications of [God's] being for human existence,"[305] Gunton suggests that the theology of the church has never been seriously rooted in the conception of the being of God as triune. "The conception of God as a triune community made no substantive contribution to the doctrine of the church."[306] Gunton posits that because

---

[302] Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 9.
[303] Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 164.
[304] As an example of Augustinian thought influencing Reformed doctrine of God, see Chapter 2 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Long before the Trinity is even named, God's essence is described in two lengthy sections, including the descriptive that "There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute…" Though not naming the WCF specifically, Gunton perceives such construals as the "tacking on of God's threeness as an unnecessary complicating of the simple belief in God" (*The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 3).
[305] Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 6.
[306] *Ibid., 61.*

Trinitarian thinking never really extended into reflection on the church in the West, the remaining vacuum resulted in ecclesiological reflection dominated by concepts of the church that are grounded in neo-platonic and other non-personal metaphysics. Additionally, faulty conceptions of the being of God have resulted in poor ecclesiastical practice. Gunton argues that because Augustine perceived the persons of the Godhead as posterior to the underlying "being" of God, he developed a concomitant theology of the church in which the being of the church exists ontologically prior to the "concrete historical relationships of the visible community."[307] This resulted in an emphasis on church as institution over and above church as community, as actual persons-in-relation. Whereas the institution of the church may exist independently and logically prior to the persons who become a part of it, or the persons may even be secondary to it, the church as an analogy of the Trinity has no being apart from the actual persons in relationship to one another. "May not the actual relations of concrete historical persons constitute the sole – or primary – being of the church, just as the hypostases in relation constitute the being of God?" Gunton inquires.[308]

This non-personal institutional vision of the church has resulted in church practices that Gunton decries, such as a clericalism that sees the true "being" of the church as bound up in those who lead it and carry forth its traditions. Gunton sees this problem as pervasive in the Western tradition, not just in the traditionally hierarchical ecclesial communions. "The churches of the Reformation have themselves been as subject as Rome to the temptations of institutionalism."[309] By recovering a doctrine of the being of God as communion *par excellence*, Gunton expects that the theology and practice of the church may also be renewed, as a new

[307] *Ibid*., 74.
[308] *Ibid., 75*.
[309] Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians*, 200.

ontology of the church as persons-in-communion issues forth in practices that emphasize relationships.

As an aside, Gunton finds great resonance in the theology of 17th century Reformed Puritan theologian John Owen, who for Gunton becomes an important interlocutor. Gunton flatly dismisses the ecclesiological work of the Reformers, who "believing that the reformation of doctrine was all that was needed, failed to develop a theology of the community."[310] In attempting to renew the visible church, the Reformers capitulated to the platonizing tendencies in Western ecclesiology since Augustine, emphasizing the true *invisible* church over and against the actual community, making Western ecclesiology "vulnerable to the dualism and spiritualism that inspire the distinction between the earthly church and the heavenly one."[311] An early and anomalous critic of this pattern, John Owen was the first (and only?) Reformed theologian to develop an ecclesiology of community, in which "it is the actual believers as they are constituted a community who make the church, not some supposed invisible underlying structure. The community is the Church."[312] Whether he recognized it or not, Owen's ecclesiology reflects the early Cappadocian theology of the Trinity, in which God *is* as the three persons of the Godhead are in eternal relation to one another. Gunton celebrates Owen's original though incomplete ecclesiological reflections as a uniquely Reformed contribution to the theology of the church, which builds on and develops further some neglected patristic themes. Gunton likely saw his own project as a continuation of what Owen began, renewing the Reformed conception of the church from within by drawing on ancient and diverse theological formulations.

[310] Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 75.
[311] Ron Chia, "Trinity and Ontology: Colin Gunton's Ecclesiology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Vol, 9, No. 4 (October 2007), 462.
[312] Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians*, 193.

In summary, Gunton desires to renew not only our conception of the Trinity but also our corresponding understanding of the church. Gunton insists that our ecclesiology must issue forth from our doctrine of God. As God has no essence behind or apart from the eternal communion of three Persons, so the people of the Triune God have no "being" apart from their concrete relationships with one another. In this way the church is called to be an "echo" or "bodying forth" of the divine personal dynamics.[313] The church is "the community that is called to echo at its own level the kind of being in relation - communion - that God is eternally."[314]

Koinonia, Perichoresis, and the Eschatological Spirit

Several aspects of Gunton's ecclesiology need further exploring in order to grasp the significance of his contribution for a missional Reformed ecclesiology. First, Gunton's reflections on the Trinity and the church led him to speak of *koinonia*, or the principle of relationality, as a transcendental reality that is embedded in all levels of the created order. *Koinonia* is a Greek word frequently used in the New Testament, especially by Paul, that is perhaps best translated as community or communion. In the church, *koinonia* speaks of the common participation of the members of the Christian community in the sharing of faith and life. Yet Gunton employs the word *koinonia* to describe not only the relationality of the church, but also the prior and eternal relationality of the being of God. If God is being-in-communion, and if all creation is generated from his being, then *koinonia*, or relationality, "is the transcendental that allows us to learn something of what it is to say that all created people and things are marked by their coming from and returning to God who is himself, in his essential and inmost being, a being

[313] Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 74. The church's life as an "echo" of Trinitarian being is a favorite analogy that Gunton frequently uses.
[314] Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians,* 194.

in relation."[315] Reality is koinonia. All of life is being-in-communion. In this case, not only does humankind achieve its own fullness when it lives in relation to God and to fellow human beings, but even the non-human creation finds its fullness in relationality to God and humankind.[316] Yet humanity, in its fallenness, does not and cannot exist in relation to the triune God. The Fall is the disastrous breach of communion that severs humanity from God, one another and creation. So God acts to restore the fullness of being. Through the person of the Son who atones for the sin of humanity and reconciles God and creation, and through the animating Spirit who grants freedom to humanity to will the communion for which it was made, God constitutes the church. In this case, the church is called to be the fulfillment of what humanity is: being-in-communion with God and one another. The call of the church is now to be "the medium and realization of communion: with God in the first instance, and with other people in the second, and as a result of the first." Framed in this way, Gunton is able to make the striking statement, "Ecclesiology can be regarded as the form of all created human being," because what we see in the church is now the deepest expression of human reality. Ecclesiology at its most subterranean level is sanctified, if not provisional, anthropology: the fullness of what humanity is.

A second and equally important ecclesiological concept for Gunton is his construal of the ancient notion of *perichoresis*. Perichoresis is a patristic conception used to describe the triune relationship between each person of the Godhead. It can be defined as co-indwelling, co-inhering, and mutual interpenetration. Theologian Alister McGrath writes that the concept of perichoresis "allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two."[317] Gunton upholds this classic interpretation of

[315] Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 299.
[316] Because Gunton argues that the non-human creation finds its wholeness in restored relationship to God, he prefers the word "relationality" over "sociality."
[317] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Blackwell, 2001), 325.

perichoresis, maintaining that "in eternity Father, Son and Spirit share a dynamic mutual reciprocity, interpenetration and interanimation."[318] Yet Gunton also conceives in the concept of perichoresis an implication of unity-in-variety for the nature of reality, in that perichoresis offers a way of articulating the oneness of things without derogating plurality. "The central point about the concept [of perichoresis] is that it enables theology to preserve both the one and the many in dynamic interrelations."[319] It allows for a kind of "relational diversity" that has a center, a *logos*, rather than a disordered diversity for its own sake.

So then, similarly to the way he employed the concept of *koinonia*, Gunton extends the notion of the perichoretic dynamic in the being of God to develop a distinct conception of the unity of all things: that the unity for which creation is made is a oneness which is never at the expense of the many. "What becomes conceivable as a result of such a development is an understanding of the particularity which guards against the pressure to homogeneity that is implied in modern relativism and pluralism… being is diversity within unity."[320]

The application for ecclesiology is clear. If the call of the church is to be the medium and realization of communion, then the church must embody this diversity in unity to fully analogize the divine life. Gunton only gestured toward the ecclesial implications of this perichoretic application, explicitly addressing the implications for a non-hierarchical form of church governance in which the particularity of individual spiritual giftings are appreciated and shared.[321] Though he did not overtly address the concept of multi-ethnicity, he did suggest that in the act of Pentecost, the Spirit acted to "reverse Babel by restoring communication and so

[318] Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 163.
[319] *Ibid.,* 163-4.
[320] *Ibid.,* 213.
[321] Colin Gunton and Daniel Hardy, eds., *On Being the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 77.

communion between the divided nations of the earth."[322] In this action, the Spirit enables in the church a diversity-in-unity that echoes the being of God, when people are able to enjoy a unified fellowship with true "others-in-relation," transcending the mere individual or homogenous states that are a "denial of human fullness."[323] Now, within the church, "representatives of all peoples and nations are explicitly included within it."[324] The diverse peoples now incorporated in the church do not cease to be the particular people they are, yet their distinctives now converge in their relationship to Jesus. Unity in diversity in the church reflects and glorifies the triune God.

A final concept that is vital for understanding Gunton's ecclesiology is the role of the Holy Spirit. Gunton affirms the classic New Testament affirmation that "the Spirit is the one who enables believers to share Jesus' relation to his Father,"[325] also following the Reformers view that the Spirit is responsible for personal regeneration, as well as sanctification and glorification. The Spirit grants human freedom to joyfully choose communion with God and humanity, the end for which humanity is made. Yet Gunton's interests are always far greater than the individual person. Gunton develops his pneumatology in unique relationship to the church in two distinct ways.

First, Gunton affirms the Spirit as the "electing God" who gathers the church to the Father through the Son.[326] Yet the Spirit elects particular members of humanity into the church not for their own benefit but for the universal blessing of the whole. Here, much like Lesslie Newbigin, Gunton re-fashions the Reformed doctrine of election as a call to ecclesial faithfulness rather than a doctrine of individual assurance. "God elects the particular in order to achieve his

[322] Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many,* 216.
[323] *Ibid.*
[324] Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 128.
[325] Colin Gunton, "The Church as a School for Virtue," from *Faithfulness and Fortitude* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 230.
[326] Gunton, "Election and Ecclesiology n the Post-Constantinian Church," 219.

universal purpose."[327] Gunton fiercely critiques the distortion of the doctrine of election within the Constantinian church, which overly emphasized the salvation of the individual and sought to sift the true elect from the reprobates within the visible church. Instead, Gunton insists, following the logic of God's election of Abraham, God desires to bless the nations and incorporate universal humanity into communion with himself. To achieve this universal end, God chooses particular groups and people, Israel and then the church, "a particular people called out from the whole for the sake of the whole."[328] Gunton notes that when such incorporation happens within a Christian community, such as when Jews and Gentiles worshipped and lived together as one in the early church, it is "the central mark of salvation," the proleptic achievement of God's universal purposes.

The second way Gunton uniquely develops his pneumatology in relation to the church concerns the role of the Spirit in eschatological consummation. Gunton defines the Spirit as the "perfecting agent of all creation," the one who animates creation through redemption to consummation.[329] In this sense the Spirit has an "eschatological office," since the Spirit is the person of the Godhead who acts in history to move creation toward its intended end.[330] As stated in the Nicene Creed, the Spirit is "the Lord, the giver of life," not just in the beginning but in the end.

The church, then, is central to the Spirit's eschatological purpose. As has already been mentioned, the *telos* of humanity is occasionally realized within Christian congregations, when humanity embodies its calling as those created for community with God and others. Yet in

[327] Ibid., 213.
[328] Gunton, *The Christian Faith,* 127.
[329] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 120.
[330] For an analysis of Gunton's pneumatology, see Michael D. Stringer, "The Lord and Giver of Life: The person and work of the Holy Spirit in the trinitarian theology of Colin E Gunton," (Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)). University of Notre Dame Australia. http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/3.

incorporating the church, the Spirit also gathers redeemed humanity to represent the anticipated eschatological community when all creation is consummated. "The mystery of the church is that it is called to serve that end of the reconciliation of all things in Christ," Gunton writes.[331] Since redeemed community (the bringing of all creation to the Father in Christ) is the destiny of creation, "the church is called to be the community that plays a central part in the perfecting through Christ of the created order."[332] Yet this perfecting work is always the work of the Spirit. The Spirit gifts and animates the church, so that within the local congregation there might be "the building of that community which is called to praise God in worship and life and so to achieve in its worship and work anticipations of the reconciliation of all things in Christ."[333] The church orders its life around the risen and ascended Jesus, and "in so far as the church's mode of life does from time to time anticipate that of the age to come, it is enabled to do so by the Spirit who both makes present the life-giving death of Christ and will complete its eschatological perfecting on the last day."[334] In this sense the church is called to be "the community of the last times," enabled by the Sprit to realize in its present life the promised and already inaugurated reconciliation of all creation.[335]

Seen in this light, Gunton re-casts the classic Reformed "marks" of the church in an eschatological frame. While Calvin classically defined the marks of the true church as right preaching and the right administration of the sacraments, Gunton observes that within a monistic, institutional ecclesiological setting these marks amount to little more than "the reception of individual doses of religion."[336] Yet within a trinitarian, eschatological ecclesiology, the marks

---

[331] Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians*, 203.
[332] *Ibid.*
[333] *Ibid.*
[334] Colin Gunton, "'Until he comes': towards an eschatology of church membership." *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 3 no (2 Jul 2001), 263.
[335] Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 82.
[336] Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians*, 203.

become the vehicles through which the Spirit continuously reconstitutes the church, uniting the congregation to the Son, and anticipating the life of the age to come. "The Church is more than an institution because it is a community that must, ever and again, take place: it must be constituted in the present as the people of God. To achieve such constitution is the Spirit's eschatological work."[337] Through baptism, the church celebrates the Spirit's incorporation of diverse humanity into the common bond of Christ. Through the Lord's Supper, the Spirit breaks down walls of separation and draws divided humanity to a common meal through the reconciling work of the Son. Through the preaching of God's Word, the Spirit claims and re-claims a particular group of people as those who are now bound in communion with God and one another. These multitudinous acts of the Sprit within a particular congregation anticipate the uniting of all things in Christ.

Summary

Colin Gunton's seminal contribution to ecclesiology was to ground the theology of the church in the doctrine of God. As an academic, pastor and servant of the local church, Gunton was passionate to see the church break forth from its impersonal, institutional stultification, and to embody its identity as the "medium of communion," echoing forth the image of the triune God in its communal life. Gunton believed that in grounding the ontology of the church in the

[337] *Ibid*, 202. For statements like this, and his often-used descriptor "from time to time" to describe the Spirit's work in the church, Gunton has been criticized as an "occasionalist," who views the church as only episodically constituted, or in some ways separated from the work and person of Christ. Gunton seems to include this language because he is concerned about the tendency of churches to view the Spirit as a "claimed possession" or to confuse the work of the Spirit with that of the church. He wants to affirm the Spirit as transcendent, other and free. I'm sympathetic to this concern, but this criticism ignores Gunton's primary affirmation of the church as *community*, constituted in the relationships of actual people in communion with one another. In my view, Gunton is not arguing here that in the occasion of preaching and sacraments the Spirit makes the church something other than it is in its communal life, but that the Spirit "renews" the church's identity as those bound to Christ, to realize communion and to anticipate the consummation.

ontology of the Trinity, the church could be rescued from institutional demise and renewed as a diverse community in mission, anticipating the reconciliation of all things.

Perhaps the most compelling quality of Gunton's reflections on ecclesiology was that the laboratory of his ecclesiological work was an ordinary congregation. Gunton wrote the statement written on a banner hanging in the entrance hall of his local church: "The church is a community of all ages called to praise God in worship and in life." His vision of the church as a community reflecting the being of God and anticipating the reconciliation of all things animated his work. Yet for all his lofty visions, he had a sober assessment of the church's future in the West. In sermons to his congregation, he wondered aloud if the church was "a lost cause, a relic of the past."[338] He confided to his church, gathered on a gloomy Sunday morning in an under-filled room, that "we seem like less the players in a great drama than the last remnants of a great experiment."[339] Yet he was resolute, that rather than perpetuate an hierarchical institution, the church must be renewed as God's called-out community for the world, especially for the changing world of the secular West. "We have to begin to organize our church life so that everything we do is ordered to mission," he urged, "to call the world to share in our calling."[340] He believed firmly that "[i]f the church is to be church in the post-Constantinian age, she must renew her sense of her calling to be a particular people serving a universal ends."[341] Instead of serving herself and her own needs, the church must shift "to an orientation to the promised reconciliation of all things in Christ."[342] That grand vision can begin in the ordinary life of the

[338] Gunton, *Theology Through Preaching*, 138.
[339] *Ibid.,* 140.
[340] *Ibid.*
[341] Gunton, "Election and Ecclesiology," 226.
[342] *Ibid.*

local congregation, as they deepen communal life and invite diverse people to share in the unity-in-variety that the Trinity makes possible.

CONCLUSION

Our aim in this chapter has been to survey three voices in the Reformed tradition and their formal ecclesiological reflections, in order to consider how they might contribute to shaping a distinctly Reformed, missional ecclesiology for the church in a multicultural age. Several commonalities and overlapping themes have emerged that can contribute to such a constructive Reformed ecclesiology. First, while Newbigin, Boesak and Gunton were all laboring in extremely different circumstances, each of them were in some ways also practitioners in the leadership of the church, calling the church to embody its missional character in the challenging contexts of their times. Second, each of them sought to do the creative work of "appropriation" with their own Reformed tradition, critiquing their heritage while building on it for a new time and place. As Wolterstorff writes, "Appropriation of one's tradition implies neither uncritical acceptance nor total rejection; it entails a discriminating adaptation of its features to one's own situation."[343] Finally, they each develop ecclesiological themes that have intersecting application. These include emphasis on the visible community of the congregation as the church's true identity, the reconciled diversity within the congregation as emblematic of God's reign and God's personhood, and the eschatological orientation of the church that signals the coming reconciliation of all things and peoples. These will be vital themes as we bring them into conversation with the lived ecclesiologies of the congregations we surveyed in chapter 3, in order to propose a renewed, Reformed ecclesiology for missionary churches in diverse, secularized environments.

[343] Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, ix.

CHAPTER 5: CHARTING A NEW PATH: CONSTRUCTING A REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY FOR MISSIONARY CHURCHES IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS

The driving question of this project has been: *What theological themes contribute to a missionary ecclesiology that is Reformed and also suitable for congregations operating in contexts of cultural plurality?* We began by assessing the vulnerabilities within the Reformed tradition that make it resistant to cultural diversity (Chapter 1). Using the American Presbyterian denominations of the PC(USA) and the PCA as case studies, we surveyed a complex set of factors that have resulted in a theological movement which is culturally intransigent. These factors include histories of intellectual sacerdotalism and racial oppression, a "spiritualist" theology that fails to grapple with socio-political realities, and a habit of confusing normative practices with cultural forms.

These problems are complicated, and simply proposing a fresh take on ecclesiology will not solve them. Nevertheless, Chapter 2 proposed a methodology for the process of constructing an ecclesiology that seeks to take these problems seriously, by bringing both inductive and deductive sources of ecclesiological reflection into conversation with one another. Borrowing from Nicholas Healy's work on "practical-prophetic" ecclesiology[344] and John Flett's proposal of an "apostolic" ecclesiology,[345] we suggested a methodology that does not begin in abstraction, attempting to describe the theological invariable essence of what a Reformed congregation in multicultural contexts "should" be. Rather, we sought to construct a refreshed Reformed ecclesiology by beginning with the church as it actually is, the church in mission striving to be faithful to its apostolic calling in contexts of cultural plurality. In doing so, we examined three

[344] Nicholas M. Healy, *ibid.*
[345] John G. Flett, *ibid.*

congregations that are self-consciously Reformed, taking risks to reach the diverse communities in which they are located, and in the process undergoing an experience of deconstruction and reconstruction of their own theological traditions (Chapter 3). What resulted was a compendium of "lived theologies" which emerged from their improvisations, a set of ecclesiological themes inductively mined from the practices of Reformed people seeking to be faithful to the *missio Dei* in multicultural contexts.

While Chapter 3 assessed the "lived ecclesiologies" of congregations in mission, Chapter 4 turned to the "formal ecclesiologies" of Reformed theologians who expressly wrestled with the theology of the church in the context of the declining dominance of European culture in the West, and the growing reality of cultural plurality. Having faced the serious limitations of the Reformed tradition, these thinkers demonstrate creative possibilities laden within the tradition that might empower the future church for faithful mission. Newbigin's vision of the church as "foretaste, sign and instrument" of God's Kingdom, Allan Boesak's embrace of "world-formative Christianity," and Colin Gunton's thinking on the church as "an echo of the Trinity," each represent a discriminating adaptation of concepts from classic Reformed ecclesiology for a new missionary moment.

Our goal now in this final chapter is to bring these two voices of theology, lived and formal, into conversation with one another, to construct an ecclesiology for congregations seeking to be faithful to their missionary callings in the post-Christian, multicultural West. This ecclesiology will be recognizably Reformed, drawing from research of both Reformed congregations and theologians, yet will also be practical for churches of diverse traditions. In carrying out this constructive attempt, we must take care not to fall into the pitfalls of much modern ecclesiology, what Nicolas Healy describes as the presentation of an idealized account

of the church divorced from its practices, or an approach that seeks to get our thinking right about the church after which we may put our theories into practice.[346] Our methodology, articulated in Chapter 2, proposed a dialogical approach, in which theory-laden practices and practice-redolent theory interact with one another. For this reason, we will return to the salient ecclesiological themes that emerged in the congregational studies in Chapter 3, and explore how they are enhanced and refined by the work of Newbigin, Boesak and Gunton.

A Reformed, missionary ecclesiology for congregations in multi-cultural contexts will include at least the following characteristics: it will be *covenantal, transformationist, anticipatory, and generous*.

A Covenantal Ecclesiology

Central to the Reformed vision of the church is the theological concept of covenant. The church is not an aggregation of saved individuals, but a new humanity created by grace now called into relationships of fidelity and responsibility with one another and the surrounding world. As one American Presbyterian denomination states:

> We are elect in Christ to become members of the community of the new covenant. This covenant, which God Himself guarantees, unites us to God and to one another. Already in the creation, we discover that we are made to live in relationships to others, male and female, created together in God's image. In Christ, we are adopted into the family of God and find our new identity as brothers and sisters of one another, since we now share one Father. Our faith requires our active participation in that covenant community.[347]

In most modern Reformed denominations and churches, the theological emphasis on covenant has its most direct implications on church governance and sacramental practice. "The polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)," states the PC(USA) Book of Order, "presupposes the

[346] Healy, 26.
[347] "Essential Tenets & Confessional Standards," A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, www.eco-pres.org, (accessed 19 May 2020).

fellowship of women, men, and children united in covenant relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ. The organization rests on the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love."[348] Additionally, Reformed leaders often employ covenantal theology to emphasize the continuity of salvation between Old and New Testaments and to defend the practice of infant baptism. While not neglecting the value of sacraments and ordered governance, for the congregational leaders interviewed in chapters 1 and 3, the theme of "covenant community" emerged as a major orienting metaphor of identity and took on distinct meanings that pulls historically marginal implications of the concept of "covenant" into the center of importance.

First, for these leaders, covenantal ecclesiology is predominantly about *relationality*. Specifically, covenant suggests relationships between diverse people unified in a common spiritual family. At New City Fellowship (NCF) in Chattanooga, images of "family" and "home" are used extensively to describe the identity of the congregation. Pastor Jin at the Church of All Nations (CAN) in Minneapolis uses the Korean "kinship" metaphor to call his multinational congregation into committed relationships with one another. For churches like these, "family" is a potent theological metaphor because fewer sociological factors exist in such heterogenous churches that naturally bind the congregations together. Kevin Smith, pastor of New City Fellowship, reflects, "The idea of the church being multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-class, multi-lingual--it's from the very beginning. Covenant theology gives that to us."[349] Rather than emphasize how the church is *structured*, these congregations employ covenantal language to

[348] *PC(USA) Book of Order 2019/2020, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part 2* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 2019), 19.
[349] Kevin Smith, personal interview.

describe how the church is *constituted*, namely by diverse people bound together through grace, now committed to one another despite cultural differences.

Not only does covenant describe the constitution of diverse congregations, it also suggests responsibility that members have for one another. In the same way a congregation "takes as their own" a child when she is baptized, so churches that are seeking to embody diverse humanity must take responsibility for others with whom they may not naturally share a common concern or experience. Richard Mouw describes an experience when he was pastoring a multi-racial inner-city church in Grand Rapids, Michigan:

> One Sunday a single mother presented her little boy for baptism and the congregation took the vows, you know, to support him in his journey of faith. I wrote a little thing in the Reformed Journal about what a radical act that was. Race relations isn't just about being nice, even just caring about justice, but *it's simply being the church*, because once Daryl became a member of the church and the church pledged to support him in his journey of faith, we had to care about every racial slur, every discrimination. Those vows the congregation took were radical vows, and it was really radical vows for the whole, for the global church. *Together we are incorporated into the covenant*.[350]

When racial justice is cast as an aspect of the activity of the church, it may always remain an obligation to the "other." But in the diverse congregation, covenant stresses mutual responsibility for fellow members, who each bring their varied gifts, needs and struggles into the common life of the family. Racial justice, a concern for a family member's welfare, becomes inherent to relationship.

While not explicitly using the language of "covenant," Colin Gunton fortifies this reinterpretation of covenant theology as relationality, or *being-in-communion*. In seeking to renew our thinking on the church by aligning it with our doctrine of God, Gunton posits that the people of the Triune God have no "being" apart from their concrete relationships with one another, in the same way that God has no essence behind or apart from the eternal communion of

[350] Richard Mouw. Personal interview. 26 June 2013.

the three Persons. There is not the individual Christian, who then chooses the church; rather, God incorporates men and women into the new humanity created in and through the events of the gospel. The Christian life is defined by the *koinonia*, the being-in-communion with God and one another that is now made possible through the covenant of grace. Crucially, this *koinonia* is not a voluntary association of similar persons, but a diversity-in-unity that reflects the perichoretic being of God. Not only relationality, but unity-in-variety is the nature of reality, enabling us to express oneness without derogating plurality. Thus, for the faithful multi-ethnic church, diversity is not an end in itself, but is a "centered diversity," a relationality that honors the distinctives of each person while remaining unified around a common relationship to Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit enables in the church a diversity-in-unity that echoes the being of God, when people are able to enjoy unified relationships with "others-in-relation," transcending individualism on the one hand and homogeneity on the other, both of which are a "denial of human fullness."[351]

Interestingly, Gunton gestured toward church polity as an application of perichoretic relationships. Congregations can be structured in ways that faithfully or unfaithfully reflect the being of God, either by honoring the diversity-in-unity at the heart of reality or suppressing it. While governing structures in the church are often construed in terms of "the permanent subordination of one group to another," Gunton suggests "an ecclesiology of perichoresis" would be one in which "a church is governed by overlapping patterns of relationships, so that the same person will sometimes be 'subordinate' and sometimes 'superordinate' according to the gifts and graces being exercised."[352] Gunton does not elaborate beyond this, but this theme of relationality and governance as a promising practice latent in Reformed theology is given a notable degree of attention by church practitioners in the multicultural context. Brian Blount, president of Union

[351] Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 216.
[352] Gunton and Hardy, eds., *On Being the Church*, 77.

Presbyterian Seminary, grew up in the African American Baptist tradition but later became a Presbyterian. Blount reflects,

> I've very much appreciated the democratization of the faith tradition that you find in the Reformed tradition that is not there in the black Baptist tradition that I grew up in, where the minister is really kind of the authority figure, not just symbolically but literally, and everything runs through that person. I had always had a sense that the community has a role to play within the life and the direction of the church… So I like the sense that the community of believers felt a sense of shared governance in the life of the church, individual churches and then the broader connected church. So how the theology lives itself out in ecclesiology was important to me.[353]

In more hierarchical traditions in which the pastor holds greater authority, the leader's particular style and culture may come to dominate the cultural traditions of the congregation. A flatter, more representative polity in which governance is shared, on the other hand, invites "room at the table" for each person to be honored in their varied cultures, interpretations and approaches. Timothy Keller, former pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, agrees: "Presbyterian polity is flexible enough to allow the diversity at whatever level is missionally required."[354] Polity is not neutral, but like all congregational practices, is laden with theological meaning. For missionary churches in multicultural contexts, the Reformed vision of church as covenant community offers a pathway for church governance in which diverse voices and concerns can inhabit equitable spaces of authority. In each of the congregations interviewed in chapter 3, great effort and intentionality is made to identify leaders representative of the diversity of the congregation to serve on the governing boards of the churches, as well as represent the spectrum of the congregation in leading public gatherings and services.

The implications for this "perichoretic" covenant ecclesiology extend beyond polity and leadership to actual practices of worship. As a new family of diverse people called together in

[353] Brian Blount. Personal interview. 19 March 2013.
[354] Timothy Keller. Personal interview. 12 March 2015.

Christ, gatherings of worship become environments not just to express communion with God but also communion with one another. Just as the Trinity is bound together in unity without subjugating the particularities of each divine person, so perichoretic worship within the covenant community seeks to express unity in Christ while elevating the unique cultural contributions of each particular member. One multi-ethnic congregation in Richmond, VA, employs what they call "the 75% rule." The rule suggests that when they gather for worship, everyone should be comfortable with no more than 75% of what is happening during the service of worship, because otherwise it may suggest that one person's cultural preferences are being dominantly expressed. Recognizing that each element of worship expresses a particular cultural form that will naturally be more pleasing to some and less others, they seek to stretch as much as possible within the service of worship to honor the diverse cultures of those in the spiritual family.[355] While this "rule" is only one way to express this theological principle of perichoresis, it is emblematic of what a renewed ecclesiology can accomplish that emphasizes *relationality* over particular forms.[356] Covenantal ecclesiology, when interpreted first through the lens of relationality rather than a particular structure, is a powerful resource for churches in mission in diverse contexts.

We have reflected on how this notion of covenant is an important ecclesiological theme to describe the inter-personal nature of diverse-yet-unified relationships within the congregation, but the concept of covenant also serves as a lens for articulating *a congregation's responsibility*

[355] Amy Julia Becker, "Want to be Multiethnic? Get Ready for Discomfort," *Thin Places*. https://www.christianitytoday.com/amyjuliabecker/2014/august/want-to-be-multiethnic-get-ready-for-discomfort.html (accessed 18 May 2020).

[356] This is not to say that churches that follow set liturgical forms cannot be diverse. On one end of the spectrum, the Roman Catholic global church is extremely diverse and employs traditional trans-cultural liturgies, while on the other end of the spectrum, many charismatic and neo-Pentecostal churches are extremely diverse and have their own set "liturgical forms" in predictable patterns of charismatic worship practices. My point here is that one contribution that Reformed theology can make to fostering effective missional churches in multicultural environments is by emphasizing a covenant-based relational ecclesiology that encourages mutual contributions of diverse cultures within the context of worship.

for those in the community beyond the church. God's covenant begins not with the people of God, but with all of humanity. Kevin Smith, pastor of New City Fellowship, states that "The covenant shows us that God was not just concerned with the people of Israel. The covenant embraces the Gentiles, it embraces all of humanity."[357] For Smith, covenantal theology resonates with his upbringing in the African-American community, which "feels a responsibility for everyone in the community." A common feature of the three congregations we studied in chapter 3 is that each of them *extend their sense of covenantal responsibility beyond the members of the congregation to include the community in which they are located*. New City Fellowship believes it is called to "bridge the divide" between the segregated black and white populations of East Chattanooga. Spirit and Truth Fellowship did not seek to become a multi-racial church, but became one as they reached out to a neighborhood that was culturally changing and began to slowly resemble it. Church of All Nations intentionally sought to reach and represent the new immigrant populations that began to settle in North Minneapolis. In each of these cases, none of the congregations is seeking diversity as a singular stated goal, but rather saw their covenantal responsibility to be a congregation *in, of, and for* the particular community in which they were positioned. The calling of these congregations is to represent their communities to God, while also representing God to their communities.[358] This is covenantal ecclesiology in a missional frame.

This is precisely how both Newbigin and Gunton explained the Reformed doctrine of election. Gunton reframed the doctrine of election as a call to faithfulness to God's mission

[357] Smith.

[358] Perhaps an even better metaphor here, though not one employed by the congregations or theologians I researched, is that of "priesthood." As Israel was called to be a "kingdom of priests" to the nations (Exodus 19:6), so the Apostle Peter calls the church to be a "royal priesthood" on behalf of the nations (1 Peter 2:9). This concept of a priestly community emphasizes the church's "mediating role between God and the rest of his creation" Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 173. If the priestly community is called to represent the whole community to God, it cannot but seek to be multicultural. See Paas, 173-181.

rather than a doctrine of individual assurance. "God elects the particular in order to achieve his universal purpose."[359] A collection of believers is called together not to enjoy their privileged status, but to be a sanctified, if not provisional, emblem of reconciled humanity in a particular place. Now, in and through the church, representatives of all peoples and all nations are explicitly included within it. God fulfills his covenant with all nations by beginning with the church.

Similarity, Lesslie Newbigin insisted on the "missionary character of the doctrine of election."[360] By choosing men and women through Jesus Christ, God brings into being visible fellowships that are now responsible for and called to love their neighbors in the name of Christ, inviting them into God's covenant community of grace. "To be elect in Christ, and there is no other election, means to be incorporated into his mission to the world, to be the bearer of God's saving purpose for this whole world, to be the sign and the agent and the firstfruit of his blessed kingdom which is for all."[361] When rooted in the missional identity of the church, the elect community embraces a covenantal responsibility for the human communities around them, looking beyond the parameters of their own social boundaries to discover who among the peoples of the earth they may welcome and include. The church is always elect for others. The covenant is not just between them, it extends beyond them.

To sum up, a distinctly Reformed ecclesiology for the missional church in a culturally pluralistic context must be *covenantal*. This accounting of covenantal ecclesiology will emphasize both *relationality* and *responsibility*. First, relationality because rather than emphasize particular structures or forms, congregations in diverse contexts must arrange themselves in such

[359] Colin Gunton, "Election and Ecclesiology in the Post-Constantinian Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology, Volume 53, Issue 2* (May 2000), 219.
[360] Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 101.
[361] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 87.

a way as to most faithfully embody mutuality and equity among diverse people now unified as a single spiritual family in Christ. Rather than being held together by any defining sociological factor, their common bond in Christ propels them to live as a committed spiritual family, analogizing the diversity-in-unity of the Trinity itself. Second, *responsibility* will also be an essential aspect of a renewed covenantal ecclesiology, because a congregation in a multicultural context will only be faithful to the degree that it seeks to engage and ultimately embody the diversity of the community around it.

A Transformational Ecclesiology

In Chapter 1, we noted how the history of the Reformed movement has hamstrung its capacity to engage effectively beyond the Western European culture in which it was forged. Much Reformed theology has been formed in contexts of cultural power and privilege, not taking into consideration the concerns of sub-dominant and marginal ethnic communities. Whether intentional or not, this has often resulted in a worldview that disconnects doctrine from socio-cultural realities, whether through explicit doctrines like "the spirituality of the church," or through unintentional habits that are overly occupied with individual spiritual needs and personal salvation. In turn, ecclesiologies have developed in which the purpose of the congregation is to serve and protect the spiritual concerns of members, with little or nothing to say about genuine concerns that suffering and marginalized people often face.

The modern Reformed movement is far from uniform in its approach to cultural engagement and the role of the church in societal change. Timothy Keller notes that on the surface, the modern Reformed evangelical world seems divided between "Cultural

Transformationists" and those who subscribe to a "Two Kingdoms" theology.[362] The latter is rooted in Lutheran ecclesiology, and was named in H. Richard Niebuhr's famous catalog of models as "Christ and culture in paradox."[363] It is entitled from the core teaching that God rules all of creation in and through his sovereignty over two distinct Kingdoms, the "common Kingdom" of the world and the "redemptive Kingdom" of the church. In its most stereotypical forms, the Two Kingdoms model instructs that neither the church nor individual Christian should be in the business of changing the world or society. The calling of the church is to be the church, and not impose their beliefs on the broader society. Reformed historian Michael Allen finds the root of the 19th century doctrine of the "Spirituality of the Church" in this Two Kingdoms theology. He cites Rev. J.H. Thornwell in his 1859 "Address to All the Churches of Christ, in which he insists "The provinces of church and state are perfectly distinct, and the one has no right to usurp the jurisdiction of the other…The state looks to the visible and the outward; the church is concerned for the invisible and the inward…The power of the church is exclusively spiritual."[364] Thornwell went on to defend the refusal of the Southern Presbyterian church to condemn slavery. Allen maintains that this Two Kingdoms teaching infiltrated the modern Southern Presbyterian church at large, and that the modern PCA denomination continued to hold tightly to the doctrine.

In contrast to "Two Kingdoms" theology, the "transformationists" find their roots in the work and thought of Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper. As noted in chapter 4, Allan Boesak and other Reformed neo-Kuyperians are fond of quoting Kuyper's famous phrase,

---

[362] Timothy Keller, "Coming Together on Culture, Part 1: Theological Issues," https://timothykeller.com/blog/2014/4/17/coming-together-on-culture-part-1-theological-issues (accessed May 20, 2020).
[363] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).
[364] Quoted in R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010), 170-172.

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'"[365] Because the Lordship of Christ extends over all creation, the implications of his Lordship should be brought to bear on every area of life – economics and business, government and politics, literature and art, science and law. Christians should be laboring to transform culture, to bring creation into greater alignment with the reign of God. Modern "neo-Kuyperian" interpreters of Kuyper's transformationist vision include Albert Wolters, who wrote a seminal book for the neo-Kuyperian movement, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*.[366] Wolters fathered a school of neo-Kuyperian scholars, including Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen of Redeemer University, Ontario. Wary of Kuyper's triumphalist leanings, and sensitive to the ways Kuyperian theology has been employed for oppressive purposes, this neo-Kuyperian school has helped spawn a movement among scholars and practitioners that deemphasizes politics and accentuates the Christ-centered renewal of the material world.

As expected, transformationists claim that this neo-Kuyperian vision of cultural change is the true spirit of the Reformed tradition. "Calvinism can never be accused of having a God who is too small, or a vision that is too narrow," writes I. John Hesselink. "From its powerful concept of a sovereign God whose will determines the destiny of humankind and nations to the vision of the glory of God which is manifest and acknowledged throughout the ends of the earth, Calvinism is a faith of the grand design. The ultimate concern in the Reformed Tradition transcends the individual and his salvation. It also goes beyond the church, the body of Christ. The concern is for the realization of the will of God also in the wider realms of state and culture,

[365] Cited in James D. Bratt, ed. *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.
[366] Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

in nature and in the cosmos."[367] The Transformationist vision is the renewal of creation for the realization of the Kingdom of God.[368]

In Chapter 4, we saw that theologian Allan Boesak explicitly embraced this transformationist interpretation of the Reformed tradition for the South African liberation struggle. Rejecting the faith of the South African Dutch Reformed Church as a defacement of Reformed Christianity, Boesak embraced a vision of "World-Formative Christianity," a phrase he borrowed from Nicholas Wolterstorff, a neo-Calvinist philosopher. Rather than accept or tolerate the depravity and injustices of society, Boesak maintained that "in true Reformed theology…the recognition of broken, sinful realities of our world becomes the impulse toward reformation and healing."[369] The church is called to enter the pain of the world and work for its renewal, embracing its call as an instrument of the Shalom of God. Boesak saw hope for the Reformed movement in Africa insofar as it is willing to reject the compromised distortions of a spiritualist theology, and embrace the true spirit of the Reformed tradition, "letting the tradition speak again for God's oppressed and suffering peoples."[370]

When talking to Reformed pastors and theologians at work in the trenches of ministry in multicultural contexts, the same transformationist impulse emerges. Mark Gornik, Director of

---

[367] I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1983), 108-9.

[368] In his book *Center Church*, Timothy Keller notes that the modes and applications of this Transformationist vision differ significantly. The American Religious right could be contained in this category, who seek cultural change through political action and the penetration of cultural institutions. Christian Reconstructionism, which seeks a repristinated Christendom, could also be contained in this neo-Kuyperian camp. However, Al Wolters and his neo-Calvinist colleagues were the original group in North America that invoked Kuyper as an architect for cultural engagement, and differ sharply from the Christian Right and Reconstructionists most notably in their views on politics as a means to cultural transformation. See Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 196. Even still, concerns remain about the "transformationist" model of mission, and how it aligns a human vision of a Christian social order too closely with God's own mission of redemption. For a critique of the transformationist vision as a missionary model, see Paas, 74-86.

[369] Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 90.

[370] *Ibid*., 95.

City Seminary in NYC, was in 1988 a PCA pastor attempting to start a church in inner city Baltimore. A student of Wolterstorff himself, he believed the church must do much more than save souls, but to work for the justice and peace of historically oppressed and impoverished communities. According to Gornik, salvation is "God putting back together a broken world."[371] This vision of salvation as "creation regained" propelled him and his team to establish a church committed to the restoration of a struggling neighborhood. Gornik reflects,

> "At the time, doing community development and housing, in the Presbyterian PCA mindset, was not really that important. [People told us,] 'It's okay that you're doing this. Maybe it's preparation for the gospel. Maybe it's mercy ministry. But it's not really the work of the gospel. The work of the gospel is proclaiming Jesus Christ.' Well, in my mind, if I am Reformed, proclaiming the Gospel means also living the Gospel and working so that people don't go to bed in shacks. So, to me the whole idea of New City as a holistic approach to being Christian in an urban community, and seeing it all as God's world and work to redeem it, I don't anything to me is more reformed."[372]

The church that Gornik went on to start, New Song Community Church, helped lead a comprehensive restoration of 72 square blocks in East Baltimore, creating jobs, housing, and quality education. "The church is God's reconciled community pursuing justice at the point of greatest suffering in the world," Gornik posits.[373] Justice and reconciliation are not tangential to, but constitutive of ecclesial life in union with Christ.

One of Gornik's mentees, Jeff White of New Song Community Church of Harlem, reiterates the same. White credits Albert Wolters and his book *Creation Regained* for bringing him into the Reformed faith, and Wolterstorff's reflections on the concept of *Shalom* for helping keep him there. A pastor of a multi-ethnic PCA church, White recalls that "I am always preaching about the Kingdom of Jesus and Jesus as the King of the Kingdom. Our personal

[371] Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace*: *Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 101.
[372] Mark Gornik. Personal interview. 17 April 2013.
[373] Gornik, *To Live in Peace*., 169.

salvation and forgiveness are a part of that, but only a piece. I always keep the broader story in mind – where history is going and God's ultimate concern to rescue his creation and set all things right again… God is not just restoring souls, but restoring creation."[374] For pastors like Gornik and White, a vision of salvation that incorporates the restoration of creation and the righting of injustice invariably leads the church to embrace a more activist posture towards its surrounding community.

This same theme emerged in the churches we encountered in chapter 3. Each of the three churches in varied ways understand the mission of the congregation to be oriented around the transformation of social reality. For the people of New City Fellowship, the gospel has social and economic implications on race relations and social injustice. Church of the Nations understands its calling to offer hope of reconciliation to a divided and racially segregated society. And Spirit and Truth Fellowship describes itself as existing for the healing of its neighborhood. In their own ways, each of these churches embraces a gospel that has power to reconcile races, transform neighborhoods, and combat oppression and imperialism. The church, in turn, is seen as a bearer of that message and a vehicle of the *Missio Dei*, God's commitment to bring Christ's Kingdom to a broken creation.

In all these cases, it is clear that a congregation's identity and mission is directly linked to its concept of salvation. Whether or not a church understands itself to be an instrument of social healing and justice depends on what the church considers to be its *object* of witness. The late missiologist David Bosch explains, "…one's theology of mission is always closely dependent on one's theology of salvation, one's soteriology; it would therefore be correct to say that the scope of salvation—however we define salvation—determines the scope of the missionary

[374] Jeff White, Personal Interview.

enterprise."[375] If the parameters of salvation are only as wide as the soul of the individual, then the concomitant mission of the church will undoubtedly be interpreted as strictly evangelistic. If, on the other hand, the parameters of salvation are extended to include creational renewal, then the church's mission will include social and material justice and restoration.[376] A Reformed, transformationist ecclesiology provides a concept of salvation that involves redemption of soul and body, humanity and creation. It therefore issues into a theology and practice of mission that involves both action and proclamation, and constitutes a church that exists as an agent of God's renewing and comprehensive mission in the world.

How does a transformationist ecclesiology translate into actual practices of the church? As noted in Chapter 1, simply incorporating lofty language of racial justice and social healing within the official documents of a congregation or denomination does not lead to more diverse, engaged congregations. A transformationist theology of the church requires translation into the ordinary practices of congregational life, as the congregation is shaped by both teaching and habits. It might translate through renewed preaching that emphasizes the totality of Jesus' reign and a rejection of the sacred/secular divide. It could manifest through narratives that congregations embrace in liturgies and habits, offering compelling pictures of human flourishing that capture imaginations. It might translate through what congregations choose to elevate and celebrate, whether stories of human vocation or quotidian efforts to shape neighborhoods and institutions for the common good. And it manifests through congregational action, as

[375] David Bosch, "Salvation: A Missiological Perspective," *Ex Auditu* 5 (1989), 139.
[376] For a thorough exploration of the relationship between soteriology and ecclesial practices, see Philip Roger Wall, *Salvation and the School of Christ: a theological-ethnographic exploration of the relationship between soteriology, missiology and pedagogy in fresh expressions of church* (Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation in Education Research, King's College, London: 2014). Through the ethnographic study of the Fresh Expressions movement in the UK, Wall demonstrates the direct relationships between soteriological and missiological beliefs and practices, while also showing that the lived and espoused theologies of such communities do not always align.

communities involve themselves in the social pain and struggles that are proximate to their people.

There are plenty of pitfalls in a transformationist model of ministry and mission. As Stefan Paas notes, concepts like "transformation" are fraught with hazards. "The whole idea of mission as cultural transformation bears the stamp of the modern age," writes Paas. "It is charged with modern optimism about humanity, such as that we have the *wisdom* to know what the world should look like, and that we have the *power* to steer it in this direction."[377] It is difficult to embrace a vision for social transformation without in one way or another seeking the instruments of power to enact envisioned change.[378] Nevertheless, the tradition of neo-Kuyperian transformationist theology, appropriated by Reformed theologians and practitioners at work in contexts of diversity, offers a significant contribution to the forging of an ecclesiology relevant to our multicultural moment. Whether it is the suffering of historically oppressed communities, or the displacement and isolation of immigrant populations, the question of suffering, injustice and segregation will confront Reformed congregations like never before. A transformationist ecclesiology, one that affirms the work of God in and for the world and the church's participation in that work, will enable congregations not only to address the concerns of marginalized people, but also to represent them.

An Anticipatory Ecclesiology

One of stumbling blocks we noted in chapter 1 that prevents Reformed congregations from adapting to new multicultural contexts is a confusion between the gospel and cultural

[377] Paas, 82.
[378] For this reason, it's vital that churches temper this activist posture with an "anticipatory" view of salvation, seeing any work in the current order as a "sign" of the transformed future that God alone can enact. Thus our next theme, "anticipatory ecclesiology"!

forms. Even while many congregations embrace the idea that mission in a new cultural moment requires contextualization and change, a deeper loyalty to particular cultural forms typically triumphs over professed adaptability. As noted in our interviews of minority pastoral leaders within Reformed denominations, leaders who suggest new cultural forms are often undercut by an attitude that views the theology and worship of the church to be invariable and even a-cultural. Such attitudes can lead to the tacit oppression of minority voices, as people of color are welcomed into homogenous spaces to increase diversity quotients, even while their unique contributions and cultural expressions are ignored.

We can view this as one consequence of what Nicholas Healey calls "Blueprint Ecclesiologies." As we saw in chapter 2, Healey characterizes "Blueprint Ecclesiologies" as those attempts to encapsulate normative and systematic descriptions of the church that are often not reflective of its everyday life, thus representing an idealized account of the church rather than one that embodies its true identity and context. "Theologians believe that it is necessary to get our thinking about the church right first, after which we can go on to put our theory into practice."[379] This is ecclesiology in a vacuum rather than a dynamic, missionary ecclesiology that is always taking account of the church's surrounding mission.

When it comes to the lived ecclesiology of many Reformed congregations, "blueprint ecclesiology" is a common operant mode. Some of the blueprint has to do with theology, but much of it has to do with worship practices. The blueprint is articulated explicitly in sources such as the Presbyterian Directory for Worship,[380] while much of the blueprint is inherited and

[379] Healy, 36.
[380] The Directory for Worship is the third section of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order*. It is a constitutional document that not only describes the theology underlying Presbyterian worship, but also establishes "standards, norms and appropriate forms for worship." https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/directory-for-worship/ (accessed 22 May 2020).

inculcated tacitly through repetition. The blueprint is embedded in hymnbooks, instrumentation, orders of worship, and the way the leaders speak when leading the congregation. The underlying narrative functions as a standard by which faithfulness to heritage is measured. Borrowing a musical metaphor, the blueprint functions like a sacred musical score, one that cannot be altered from the composer's trust, and the congregation is the symphony that practices hard so as to get every note right.

But at times there is a problem with the score. It is a robust and beautiful score, but one that was written for a different time and for a different mission. It is one that is born out of the rich, Reformed theological heritage, but also was born out of heritage that failed to see the way privilege and power conditioned theology and practice. It is a score that does not take account of a post-Christian, culturally pluralistic context. Ultimately, the score may at times suggest that the congregation is not a community of people in mission but that the church is an inheritance of the past that contemporary people can simply rehearse and memorialize for the present.

Yet the church is not an idea or even simply an institution. Healy calls it a concrete, apostolic agent. "If we begin with what the church does," Healy writes, "one of the things we must say about it is that it has been entrusted with the apostolic task. The church's responsibility is to witness to its Lord, to make known throughout the world the Good News of salvation in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ."[381] With this calling in view, Healy argues it is the task of ecclesiology not to formulate theoretical images for the church, but "to reconstrue its concrete identity so as to embody its witness."[382] The church of every age finds itself in ever shifting contexts that challenge its members to bear faithful witness to its entrusted message. Unlike forms of ecclesiology that pay little attention to the church's context and focus on

[381] Healy, 6.
[382] Ibid., 22.

describing the church's theological essence, Healy insists that the main purpose of ecclesiology is to understand and respond to its context, both how it has been corrupted and infected by it, and also how it is called to bear witness faithfully within it as apostolic agent. "We can assess any ecclesiological proposal by how well it helps the church respond to its context," Healy writes.[383] The standard for ecclesiology is not just faithfulness to the past but also orientation toward how it will be faithful to the gospel in its present and future world.

In our examinations of both espoused and formal ecclesiologies in chapters 3 and 4, we saw a theme emerge that brings balance to the Reformed inclination, especially in its more conservative modes, to emphasize faithfulness to historic forms. That is the theme of foretaste, or anticipation. At New City Fellowship, the name of the church itself ("New City") reminds the congregation that the church is called to be, in the words of the members, "a taste of what is to come," and a "preview of what heaven will be like." The worship services of Spirit and Truth Fellowship are full of statements about "showing what the Kingdom will be like." Most explicitly, the Church of All Nations' mission statement affirms, "The church is the provisional reality of the in-breaking of God's reign between Pentecost and the coming Kingdom." Though Reformed, these congregations tend not to look "backwards" to take their cues from historic forms of the past, but rather look "sideways" at the community around them and "forwards" toward an eschatological future. They seek to construct, in whatever provisional way, a window into what the future Kingdom of God would be like were it expressed in their current local context.

Lesslie Newbigin's metaphor of church as "foretaste" precisely encapsulates in a more formal way the rhetoric and practices of these congregations. For Newbigin, the church is the

[383] Ibid.

firstfruit of the coming kingdom. It is not just announcing a coming day of victory; through the gift of the Spirit who brings the power of the coming age into the present, the visible, concrete socio-historical congregation is a verifiable expression of the future kingdom in the current age. This is also why Newbigin speaks so emphatically about unity and reconciliation within the visible church. If the church is "the provisional incorporation of all humanity," into the kingdom of God, then the future vision of cultural reconciliation "must be communicated in and by the actual development of a community which embodies – if only in foretaste – the restored harmony of which it speaks. A gospel of reconciliation can only be communicated by a reconciled fellowship."[384]

Colin Gunton also developed this theme in his pneumatology and ecclesiology. Gunton describes the Spirit as "the perfecting agent of all creation," who animates creation from beginning to consummation.[385] The Spirit has an "eschatological office," since the Spirit acts in history to move creation toward its God-designed *telos*. In turn, the church is central to the Spirit's eschatological purpose. In incorporating the church, the Spirit gathers redeemed people to represent the anticipated eschatological humanity when all creation is consummated. "The mystery of the church is that it is called to serve that end of the reconciliation of all things in Christ," Gunton writes.[386] The church is "the community of the last times," enabled by the Spirit to express in its present life the promised and already inaugurated reconciliation of humanity and creation.[387]

Tangentially, this emphasis on the church as an "anticipatory" community helps temper the "transformationist" theme previously addressed. While the "Two Kingdoms" approach to

[384] Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 141.
[385] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*,120.
[386] Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians*, 203.
[387] Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. 82.

cultural engagement often results in passivity and quietism, the "Transformationist" approach can tend toward triumphalism and over-confidence in its capacity to bring about God's design for human society.[388] When untempered, a transformationist posture can expect too much from the current reality, seeking to enact very specific visions of a biblically faithful cultural order. Ecclesiology that is not only transformationist but also anticipatory believes the call of the church is to act in the power of the Spirit to manifest the love, justice and mercy of God's Kingdom in the here and now, yet it also recognizes that any such expression of God's Kingdom is "provisional" and only "from time to time anticipate[s] the age to come."[389] An anticipatory ecclesiology enables the church to offer a foretaste of the coming Kingdom without presuming to enact its full consummation.[390]

Returning to our theme, an anticipatory ecclesiology, much like the transformationist vision, is grounded in a soteriology that envisions salvation not just as the redemption of individual souls but as the restoration of a broken creation. To that end, it is the calling of the church to bear witness to that coming restoration here and now, embodying in its practical and social expressions foretastes of the coming reign of God. As missiologist David Bosch puts it in his work *Transforming Mission*, "The church is a proleptic reality, the sign of the dawning of the new age in the midst of the old, and as such the vanguard of God's new world. It is simultaneously acting as pledge of the sure hope of the world's transformation at the time of

[388] Richard Mouw jokes that neo-Calvinists "seem to have an unusual facility for finding detailed cultural guidance in the biblical record" (quoted in Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell, "Reformed Intramurals: What Neo-Calvinists Get Wrong," https://reformedjournal.com/reformed-intramurals-what-neo-calvinists-get-wrong/ (accessed 21 May 2020). This triumphalism is evident also in the American Religious Right and Reconstructionists.
[389] Colin Gunton, "'Until he comes': toward an ecclesiology of church membership." *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 3, no (2 Jul 2001), 263.
[390] I think this is why Newbigin always spent more time unpacking the metaphors of "sign" and "foretaste" over "instrument," though he always grouped all three together in his description of the church's life. His reservation about church as instrument resulted from his desire to honor God as ultimate agent of mission: "The church is not so much the agent of mission as the locus of mission." Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 119.

God's final triumph and straining itself in all its activities to prepare the world for its coming destiny."[391] As such, the practical forms of the church are germane to the mission of the church, because in their activities and behaviors the people of God express their identity as present carriers of the future Kingdom. The gathered congregation is the social embodiment of the Kingdom that bears witness to Jesus Christ.

Returning the analogy of musical forms, if classical music is representative of Blueprint Ecclesiology, then a musical representation for anticipatory ecclesiology is jazz. In his book *Resurrection City*, Peter Heltzel employs Jazz as a metaphor for the kind of "faithful improvisation" that is needed for the church in mission today. Jazz essentially takes old tunes and plays them in new ways. "While the blues is about the world that was, jazz is often about the world to come."[392] Jazz is fitted by the constraints of its musical heritage but is always improvising toward new possibilities. Hetzel writes, "Like Jazz, Christian thinking and acting exemplify a dynamic of constraint and possibility. Constrained by the norm of God's Word, Christians seek to creatively engage their world in light of the Word. In their work and witness, Christians use the materials at hand… to creatively riff for justice, love, and shalom in the present and thereby open up a new future."[393] This is "faithful improvisation;" building on the old tunes but yearning and experimenting toward the possibilities of a new future. Anticipatory ecclesiology surveys the new environment and new mission to which the church is called, and imagines what improvisations may be required to embody faithful witness. In the "Blueprint Ecclesiology" approach, change or experimentation in the church's patterns and practices can be seen as a threat or a distortion of the church's true essence, a pollution of its pure form. But in

[391] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 169.
[392] Peter Heltzel, *Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 17.
[393] *Ibid*., 21.

doing so the church assesses its faithfulness according to its own closed theological templates, rather than according to its living Lord who calls the church to bear witness to Jesus Christ in ever changing contexts.

For Reformed congregations living out their missionary callings in multicultural contexts, anticipatory ecclesiology invites each congregation to ask how, given their theological heritages, they can build on that heritage for faithful expression of the gospel in the new diverse environs to which they are called. A congregation will explore how it might embody a foretaste of the coming Kingdom and give expression to it, given the people in its geographic location, the particular problems and hardships in the community around it, and the possibilities for renewal and reconciliation. But it will not do so by discarding its heritage; just as jazz must improvise out of the rich library of its musical roots, so the local congregation improvises while staying faithful to its biblical and theological roots. We see examples of this in New City Fellowship using hip hop and spoken word to engage the congregation in the antiphonal recitation of Psalms. We witness it in Church of the Nations, as cultural expressions from Native American and Korean cultures are incorporated into the eucharistic liturgy at the Lord's Table. We find it in Spirit and Truth Fellowship's efforts to build a leadership team that mirrors the ethnic composition of its surrounding multi-ethnic neighborhood. We see it in the way these congregations seek to engage responsibly in the social struggles and economic hardships of their neighborhoods. These practices are employed not just to represent the diverse cultures of the congregation and the wider community; as evidenced in their language, it is to anticipate and embody the reconciliation of people and cultures that they believe God is enacting. Anticipatory ecclesiology forms a congregation that imagines a new future and exists to be its harbinger.

A Generous Ecclesiology

A final theme that emerged in our study of the congregations in chapter 3 was the ambivalent nature of their relationship to their own normative theological traditions and the open posture toward the traditions of others. As these churches committed themselves to carry out their mission in diverse environments, they were more intent on contextualizing their mission for their unique contexts than preserving their particular heritage. We may note at least three movements at play in this "generous ecclesiology."

First, a generous ecclesiology involves repentance. Each of the ethnic minority practitioners interviewed expressed a critical loyalty to their tradition, appreciative of it yet deeply aware of its profound mistakes. There is a chastened awareness of the failures of the Reformed tradition to cultivate flourishing theology and practice in and among non-European contexts and people. As examined in chapter 1, whether through explicit theological justification of slavery and segregation, or more passive forms of culturally isolationist church growth methods, the history of the Reformed movement in the United States is littered with complicity in segregationist practices that have incontrovertibly impacted existing demographics of local congregations. Often, these histories are suppressed, or justified as deriving from individual missteps rather than from systemic ecclesial structures. For those Reformed practitioners who dream of a future for the movement in the multicultural West, a renewed future must begin with repentance, taking responsibility for past failures and a recognizing the way those failures have shaped the present. "White Reformed Christians need to acknowledge the past, repent of their racism and ethnocentrism, their addiction to comfort, and their unwillingness to be with anyone

but their own kind," says Doug Logan, an African American Presbyterian pastor in Philadelphia.[394] A new future involves admission of past mistakes.

In August 2015, the elders of First Presbyterian Church Augusta (PCA) adopted a statement entitled, "We… and Our Fathers Have Sinned." In this statement, leaders of the predominantly white congregation confessed their own personal indifference to racial sin and their apathy during the Civil Rights area, but also the complicity of the congregation and its leaders during the American Civil War and reconstruction, its theological justification of slavery and its oppression of black community members. The church not only released a statement, but walked through a several-year journey which included services of lament and confession, formation in cultural awareness, and trust-building with communities of color. The Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian reflected later, "How important public confession of past sins—especially by a majority—is to racial reconciliation. What may feel to us to be something small, something that does not cost very much, communicates integrity and a desire for genuine relationship. As we as pastors, elders and congregation have admitted our church's past sins we have gained relationships with African-American brothers and sisters in our city. …African-Americans are beginning to visit and join our church because they are attracted to this repentant posture."[395] Without repentance, congregations that are built on the histories and structures of oppression cannot authentically welcome those who bear the wounds of those histories, whether in body or memory.

A generous ecclesiology includes repentance not simply as a literal act, but also as a posture that is willing to "turn around" in order to release aspects of congregational life in order

[394] Doug Logan. Personal Interview. 19 April 2013.
[395] George Robertson, "We….and Our Fathers Have Sinned." https://firstpresaugusta.org/resource/we-and-our-fathers-have-sinned-daniel-98/ (accessed 21 May 2020).

to incorporate others. "There is going to have to be a measure of something dying for there to be a multicultural reality to take place," explains Brian Blount, an African American Presbyterian pastor and President of Union Presbyterian Seminary. "You're not multicultural if new people come in and become a part of that sameness. There's got to be some loss. There's got to be some death."[396] Becoming an inclusive community involves admitting that particular and potentially cherished cultural forms of congregational worship and practice are not normative for all, and may not address the humanity of those that the Spirit is now incorporating into the congregation. Blount wondered, "What if being Reformed is less about particular forms of congregational life, and more about a vision of the world?"[397] Sometimes, it seems, it may take a brother or sister from another culture to demonstrate what reformation needs to occur.

So an inclusive ecclesiology involves repentance, and the Reformed tradition is uniquely qualified to admit the capacity of human individuals, institutions and societies to capitulate to evil. Unlike sacramental ecclesiologies in which the church is so connected to Christ that it is nearly above reproach, and unlike Free Will evangelical traditions in which individuals are accountable only for their own personal behaviors, in the Reformed vision the church itself can err.[398] "Reformed faith allows us to be confessional, to repent, to acknowledge the ways we are deeply sinful and yet deeply loved by God," says Manny Ortiz, pastor of Spirit and Truth Fellowship. "We are reminded that we are capable of biases and sexism and racism. Reformed faith brings that out because we depend and rely on grace so much."[399] A radical notion of sin,

[396] Brian Blount. Personal interview.
[397] *Ibid*.
[398] Al Wolters points out that the Reformed tradition offers one of the most complex visions of sin: that we are not free individuals prone to error, but are in fact personally and collectively enslaved to sin along with creation itself. "Total depravity" is not so much about an individual being totally foregone, but about every aspect of creation being touched by the depravation of sin. Thus we are provided a much more nuanced perspective on historic, systemic, and corporate structures of sin. See Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained*, chapter 3.
[399] Manny Ortiz, personal interview.

so critical to Reformed soteriology, serves as a theological resource to critique the very tradition from which it springs. To put it another way, the Reformed movement carries within its theological heritage a resource for self-critique. Interestingly, that capacity to admit error and welcome theological reformation may be one of the most important gifts the Reformed movement can offer to the contemporary conversation around multicultural mission.

Second, a generous ecclesiology involves not only repentance but also *reception*. As we saw in chapter 3, Reformed congregations bearing witness to Christ in multicultural contexts often create generous theological space for the incorporation of diverse voices. New City Fellowship, though 55% white, draws heavily from the American black church tradition in its music, hymnody and preaching. The Church of All Nations incorporates Native American spirituality into its worship services and teaches Anabaptist counter-formational practices in its spiritual formation classes. Spirit and Truth Fellowship employs Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions in Bible study and worship, and seeks to include the cultural contributions of new members into the life of the church. While these congregations have remained self-consciously Reformed, their practices of cultural reception have cultivated within them what Pastor Manny Ortiz calls "theological hospitality," making space for new and alternative voices, theologies and traditions.

An architect of trans-denominational unity, Newbigin also advocated for cultural and ecclesial hybridity for the sake of mission. Given that the missionary church is called to bear witness to a new united humanity, the congregation must open its life to varieties of traditions and experiences to faithfully express a united humanity in a particular time and place. The church "either visibly disintegrates into warring factions, or else it stands before men as a society constituted by nothing else than its relation to God through Christ, facing fallen humanity not as

a series of particular associations but simply as humanity restored to itself in Christ."[400] The church cannot act as a sign of united humanity unless it is willing to incorporate the variabilities of human culture and traditions into its common life. For Newbigin, this meant that the faithful missionary congregation would inevitably reflect a theological hybridity, as it ever seeks to incorporate the fullness of humanity around it and build unity with other local congregations in mission.

As we saw in the congregations we examined in chapter 3, an impulse toward cultural reconciliation inevitably leads toward resistance to theological and denominational isolation and a valuing of new cultural perspectives. "Those churches that can imagine life beyond the Reformed movement are the ones who will ultimately bring renewal to the Reformed movement," says Jin Kim, pastor of Church of All Nations. This receptive hybridity, born of a communal impulse to welcome and reach those not yet in the community for the sake of Christ, will be a mark of a generous ecclesiology.

Finally, a generous ecclesiology involves *rediscovery*. In studying multicultural congregations in mission, it was fascinating to witness how the practice of receptivity resulted in rediscovery and even reinterpretation of a congregation's own normative traditions. As New City Fellowship stretched to become a more multi-ethnic congregation, it embraced the theological concept of covenant as a way to describe the risky mission of bringing blacks and whites together in a historically segregated community. Church of All Nations employed the Reformed concept of "priesthood of all believers" as a way to describe the importance of giving every person in the church a space to express their own distinct cultural voice. At Spirit and Truth Fellowship, the triumph of grace is not just about personal salvation, but about an experience of

[400] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defense of the South India Scheme* (London: SCM, 1948), 17.

personal transformation and humility that eradicates cultural disdain. In something akin to a dialectic cycle, the normative theologies of these congregations helped them develop their own local and lived theologies, which in turn led them to rediscover and recast aspects of their normative theologies that they now conceived in a new light. In some cases, this has led to a cherishing of the theological vision and spirit of the Reformed tradition, even as the traditional cultural "forms" of Euro-American Presbyterianism were abandoned.

A distinctly Reformed ecclesiology for congregations in multicultural contexts will be a generous ecclesiology. The practical marks of such a theology include repentance (a willingness to take responsibility for historic failures and to invite reformation and renewal), receptivity (an openness to new traditions and cultural practices that results in a theological and denominational hybridity), and rediscovery (a recovery and reinterpretation of the tradition for new contexts). This dialectic cycle helps expose fallible aspects of the tradition even as it creates possibilities for its renewal.

Conclusion

We began this project with the simple observation that many societies in the post-Christian West are experiencing a dramatic influx of cultural diversity. This diversity is gradually manifesting itself in multiple levels of society, including business, government and education. Yet despite this reality, the American white majority church has largely remained unchanged. "Defining a mono-racial church as one that has more than 80 percent of its membership consisting of a single racial group, nearly nine in ten (86 percent) congregations,

which account for 80 percent of churchgoers, remain essentially mono-racial."[401] Among American Reformed congregations, the percentage is even smaller.

My contention in this project has been that this reality represents a crisis of the church's mission. If this moment in history is indeed what Andrew Walls describes as an "Ephesian Moment," referring to the unprecedented opportunity in the current chapter of the Western church to incorporate global cultures into congregational life,[402] then many congregations and denominations that find their roots in the Western European theological tradition are missing the occasion. What would it take for the heterogenous Western church to recover and renew its missionary calling in contexts of cultural diversity?

Though "how-to" books on multi-ethnic ministry abound, most studies overlook the fact that moving toward welcome and inclusion of new ethnicities and cultures within the church is not simply a matter of adopting new programs and styles, but inevitably will involve a crisis of theological meaning that may bring a congregation's self-understanding into question. For this reason, any exploration of the American church's missional response to multiculturalism must be thoroughly theological rather than simply pragmatic.

For the purpose of this study, I have focused on the American Reformed movement in order to single out a particular tradition that especially values its Western European theological heritage and has uniquely struggled to reach diverse populations. I've asked, *What theological themes contribute to a missionary ecclesiology that is Reformed and also suitable for congregations operating in contexts of cultural plurality*? In seeking to answer this question, my hope is not to simply offer a new normative ecclesiology, but more so to demonstrate a *process*

[401] Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 46.
[402] Andrew F. Walls, "The Ephesian Moment," in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

of theological appropriation that could be practiced in other denominations and theological traditions.

The defining questions of ecclesiology are: What is the church? What is the church's calling? How is that calling fulfilled in this particular time and place?[403] By beginning with the lived ecclesiologies of Reformed congregations seeking to reach their diverse communities, and then by bringing those themes into conversation with the formal theologies of Newbigin, Boesak and Gunton, answers to those key ecclesiological questions have been formulated. The church is a covenant community, incorporated by diverse people redeemed and in and through Jesus Christ and constituted as a new spiritual family. The church is called to be an agent of God's mission to renew creation, acting as sign and foretaste of God's coming reign of justice and reconciliation. And for churches whose "time and place" includes people of diverse cultures, the practice of mission will inevitably involve inclusion not just of new voices but new traditions and theologies, creating a process of repentance, receptivity, and rediscovery. A distinctly Reformed ecclesiology for congregations in multicultural contexts will be covenantal, transformationist, anticipatory, and generous.

Yet moving beyond the answers to the ecclesiological questions, we've witnessed a process of theological appropriation that can benefit any congregation or practitioner struggling to adapt to the present missionary moment. A key question that emerged from many of the interviews was, *What does it really mean to be a Reformed church*? Does it mean ascribing to certain creeds and confessions? Does it mean perpetuating specific cultural forms of worship? Does it mean dressing, singing, behaving in particular customs and conducts? For the congregations we examined, being a Reformed congregation is not about particular cultural

[403] Michael Goheen, *The Church and its Vocation* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 2.

forms, but about *embracing aspects of a particular theological vision that fruitfully equips the church for its unique mission*. These churches re-interpret the meaning of *semper reformanda*, ever being reforming not only according to the Word of God, but also according to the context of the church's mission, the practice of which led them to critique and appropriate their tradition for new missional ends. Being "Reformed" is not rooted in a particular normative expression, but the experience of God's sovereign rule and mission, thus enabling the church to continually rethink its own tenets and practices. If the main purpose of ecclesiology is to equip the church to respond to the mission of God in its particular time and place,[404] then this dialectic process of critique and re-appropriation is necessary for any congregation or denomination seeking to be faithful in multicultural contexts. Such "faithful improvisations" may open up new possibilities and fruitful futures for historic churches in our ever-changing world. Ultimately, it may lead the church to embody a practice of mission that is less about the perpetuation of institutions and particular cultural norms, and more about the ethnicities gathered together for the glory of God.

[404] Healy, 22.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, R. Michael, *Reformed Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010).

Bailey, Richard A, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956).

Barrett, Lois, ed., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

Boesak, Allan, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

Boesak, Allan, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977).

Boesak, Allan, "To Stand Where God Stands: Reflections on the Confession of Belhar after 25 Years," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiastecae 34,* no. 1 (July 2008): 143-172.

Bosch, David, "Salvation: A Missiological Perspective," *Ex Auditu* 5 (1989).

Bosch, David, *Transforming Mission (*Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

Bradley, Anthony, *Aliens in the Promised Land* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2013).

Bratt, James, ed. *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

Browning, Don S., *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991).

Calvin, John, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters,* Vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009).

Cameron, Helen, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeny, and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practices: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

Carter, Anthony, *On Being Black and Reformed* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003).

Chia, Ron, "Trinity and Ontology: Colin Gunton's Ecclesiology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Vol, 9, No. 4 (October 2007).

Davis, Ken, "Multicultural Church Planting Models," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* (Spring 2003): 114-127.

Dawson, John, *Healing America's Wounds* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1977).

Emerson, Michael O. and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Flett, John. *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL, 2016).

Goheen, Michael, *As the Father Has Sent Me, I am Sending You: J.E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2000).

Goheen, Michael, *The Church and its Vocation* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

Gore, Jr. R.J., "Adiaphora in Worship," *Tabletalk* (July 1, 2010).

Gornik, Mark, *To Live in Peace*: *Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

Guder, Darrell, ed., *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998).

Gunton, Colin, "Election and Ecclesiology in the Post-Constantinian Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Volume 53, Issue 2, (May 2000), 212-227.

Gunton, Colin, and Daniel Hardy, eds., *On Being the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989).

Gunton, Colin, *Theology Through Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

Gunton, Colin, *Theology Through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

Gunton, Colin, *The Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Gunton, Colin, "The Church as a School for Virtue," in Mark Nation, ed., *Faithfulness and Fortitude: Conversations with the Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

Gunton, Colin, *The One, The Three and the Many* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Gunton, Colin, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

Gunton, Colin, *The Theologian as Preacher* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007).

Gunton, Colin, "'Until he comes': towards an eschatology of church membership." *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, no 3 (2 Jul 2001).

Gutjahr, Paul C., *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Hageman, Howard, *Lily Among Thorns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Half Moon Press, 1956).

Haight, SJ, Roger, *Christian Community in History*, Vol. 1 (New York: Continuum, 2004).

Hart, D.G. and John R. Muether, "The Spirituality of the Church," *Ordained Servant* vol. 7, no. 3 (July 1998), 64-66.

Healy, Nicholas M., *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Heltzel, Peter, *Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

Hesselink, I. John, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1983).

Hunsberger, George, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

Johnson, Terry. "Pluralistic Worship," *Table Talk* (June 1, 2008).

Jones, Robert P., *The End of White Christian America* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

Karkkainen, Veli-Matti, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

Keller, Timothy, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

Laing, Mark B. and Paul Weston, eds., *Theology in Missionary Perspective: Lesslie Newbigin's Legacy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

Lucas, Sean Michael, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005).

McGrath, Alister, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Blackwell, 2001).

McIntosh, Gary L. and Alan McMahan, *Being the Church in a Multi-ethnic Community* (Indianapolis, IN: Weslyan Publishing House, 2012).

Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).

Mouw, Richard J. and Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013).

Nabors, Randy, *Merciful: The Opportunity and Challenge of Discipling the Poor out of Poverty* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *Is Christ Divided?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (London: Wm, Carling and Co., Ltd.: 1958).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *Sin and Salvation* (London: SCM, 1956).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (London: SPCK, 1997).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Household of God* (London: SCM Press, 1957).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Open Secret*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defense of the South India Scheme* (London: SCM, 1948).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

Newbigin, Lesslie, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

Paas, Stefan, *Pilgrims and Priests* (London: SCM Press, 2019).

Parker, Sarah and Raafat Girgis, *Living the Vision: Becoming a Multicultural Church* (Louisville, KY: Congregational Ministries Publishing for Evangelism and Witness Ministries of the General Assembly Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2005).

Rah, Soong-Chan, *The Next Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009).

Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012).

Sanders III, Marthame E., "A Fellowship of Concern' and the Declining Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Presbyterian Church in the United States," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-) Vol. 75, No. 3 (Fall 1997).

Schreiter, Robert. *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

Skinner, Tom, *Black and Free* (Zondervan, 1968).

Slade, Peter. *Open Friendship in a Closed Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Smallman, Stephen, *What is True Conversion?* (P&R Publishing, 2005).

Smith, Frank Joseph. *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 2d. ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Scholars Pres, 1999).

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Part II: Book of Order, 2011-2013* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church U.S.A.), 2011.

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), Part II: Book of Order 2019/2020, (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church U.S.A.), 2019.

Thomas, Derek. "The Regulative Principle of Worship," *Table Talk* (July 1, 2010).

Wagner, C. Peter, *Your Church Can Grow* (Regal Books, 1976).

Walls, Andrew F., "The Ephesian Moment," in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

Ward, Pete, ed., *Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

Webster, John, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

Wells, David, ed., *Reformed Theology in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997).

Wilmore, Gayraud, *Black and Presbyterian*: *The Heritage and the Hope* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 1983).

Wolters, Albert M., *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Journey Toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983).

SUMMARY

Within the last one hundred years, seismic changes have occurred in the religious and cultural landscape in Western Europe and North America that have altered the church's relationship to the broader culture. The emergence of the concept of the "missional church" represents a shift in the mindset of many Western churches, indicating a conviction that a missionary encounter is required with Western, secularizing culture. Yet the missional church movement often neglects one of the most significant changes in late-modern Western society: the influx of cultural plurality and ethnic diversity through migration, globalization, and the changing nature of cities.

This reality has created a crisis of identity for many majority-culture churches operating within a context of cultural diversity. Congregations that place a high value in clear doctrine and tight systems of belief, such as those within the American Reformed tradition, consistently view diversity and cultural pluralism as a threat to the church. In increasingly pluralistic societies, the idea of universally cultural normative set of beliefs and practices is held in question, and for churches that hold to a timeless, unchanging revelation of God's salvation in Christ, this constitutes a profound hazard. In response, churches may express a tentative openness to some surface forms of diversity, but in reality may become more intractable in their parochial or denominational traditions and practices.

Nevertheless, the realities that globalization and pluralism have created also constitute a tremendous opportunity for the Western church. Missiologist Andrew Walls calls this moment in history an "Ephesian moment," referring to the unprecedented opportunity in the current chapter of the Western church to translate the Christian gospel into the lifeways of the world's cultures,

even within a single local congregation.[405] But this will require fresh forms of ecclesiology that can account for and give meaning to these adaptations.

On the one hand, it will require attention to an ecclesiology "from below," examining congregations that are seeking to become engage the cultural diversity around them and discovering what their practices communicate about their theology of the church and its mission. On the other hand, it will require an ecclesiology "from above," taking account for the theological themes that can inform and deepen the formation and mission of congregations as multi-cultural communities in a pluralistic society.

What kind of theology undergirds the practices of those congregations that seek to engage with their multicultural surroundings, and perhaps become multicultural themselves? What does the congregational life of such congregations communicate about the gospel and the church? What ecclesiological frames can help to inform, develop and enrich the theology and practices of such congregations?

This project aims to answer these questions and out of them to construct a practical ecclesiology that better equips congregations to carry out their missionary calling in multicultural contexts. This ecclesiology will be rooted in and resonant with the Reformed tradition, offering the particular contributions that the Reformed tradition proffers, yet hopefully one that also resonates with the broader ecumenical discussion about the contemporary missionary encounter with Western society.

---

[405] Walls, Andrew F. "The Ephesian Moment," *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History.* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

The directing question of this project is: *What theological themes contribute to a missionary ecclesiology that is Reformed and also suitable for congregations operating in contexts of cultural plurality?* Chapter 1 frames the problem, examining the obstacles that American Reformed congregations face in engaging with and incorporating diverse peoples and cultures. Chapter 2 develops a theological methodology for a fresh ecclesiological approach, proposing a dialogical interplay of ethnography and theology. Chapter 3 presents ethnographic research on three American Reformed congregations that are intentionally seeking to engage missionally with their multicultural environments, and suggests some valuable themes of their embodied beliefs and lived theologies that contribute to the project. Chapter 4 deepens the conversation by assessing the formal ecclesiologies of Lesslie Newbigin, Allan Boesak, and Colin Gunton, and proposes resources from their contributions. Finally, chapter 5 brings the lived theologies of chapter 3 and the more formal theologies of chapter 4 into conversation, and seeks to construct an an ecclesiology for missional congregations in the multicultural West that is distinctly Reformed yet is also suitable for congregations from diverse traditions.